

Editor's Foreword:

Once again, I've tried to leave as much intact as I could from the original release. Chapter 5 was originally missing all the pictures, so I had to go and find them.

Anyway, enjoy!

~Moonfaerie24

Translator's Foreword:

Chapter 5 is set in Hong Kong, so the names of places in Hong Kong were written in Chinese- this was kind of hard for me, but I can assure you that I did A LOT of research into finding the correct names in English for them. If I have messed up, forgive me.

Also, a note concerning the Chinese that is used in this chapter: there are instances where I put in the actual Chinese characters, when I felt it was appropriate (such as the names of signs)- there are other instances where I romanized the Chinese so that an English speaker has some idea of what's being said- but overall I did not translate the Chinese (because if the Japanese reader doesn't know what it means, then there isn't any reason for the English speaker to). You will understand as you read why I have done this. To those who can read Chinese: if there are any problems with the Chinese, blame the author, not me, as I have only copied straight from the book.

WARNING!

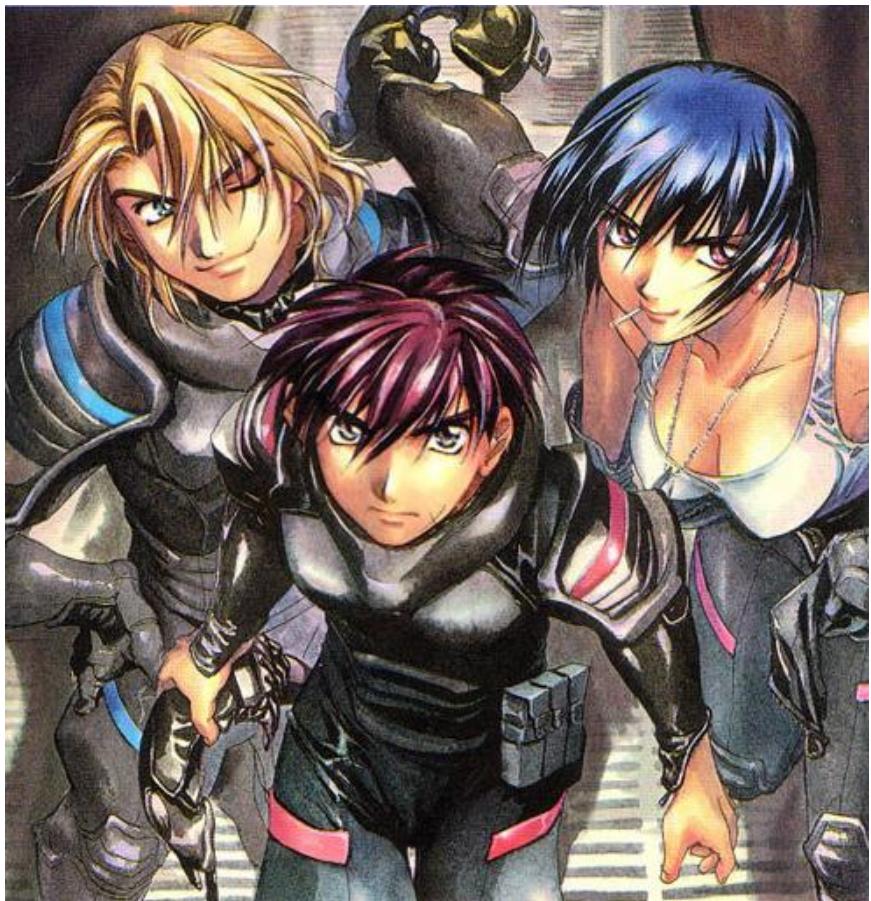
There is some strong language used in this part, so please be aware of that before you proceed. This was mainly my discretion as a translator- I could have dumbed it down, but I decided to go with what I had and translate in the manner I thought best.

Brandi

Full Metal Panic!

Ending Day by Day (Part 2)

By Shoji Gotoh



Translator: Brandi

Editors: Mukanshin, Moonfaerie24

Chapter 3: Black and White (continued)

October 20th, 19:05 (Western Pacific Standard Time)
Northern Part of Merida Island Base
Practice Grounds

Waves of information came surging in over the battle-status cockpit screen.

The digital images of the scenery captured by the optical sensors were streaming in very fast.

The jungle had started to cool down in the twilight, and the sky was harmoniously dyed in shades of crimson and purple. The sudden gusts of wind that the ASes caused violently shook the now-darkened trees.

The afterimages of everything appeared at the top of the screen and vanished.

There were many types of gauges. A G-meter going up and down little by little. A bearings grid rotating left and right. A variable grappler mode reticule. The target box and motion indicator ran wild, the power gauge expanded and contracted, and the AI's buzzers sounded off in rapid succession.

<Movement detected!>

From the direction of 8 o'clock, behind from the left.

Lieutenant Clouseau's M9 closed in on the Arbalest, which was hidden in the dense thicket.

The jet black AS was approaching. It had two flaming orange eyes.

“...!”

Impact.

Sousuke's Arbalest narrowly dodged it. The black M9's training knife grazed its armor.

There was also a sharp flash. He lunged, swung at him, then reeled off a succession of roundhouse kicks.

While provocative, it also had a unique rhythm to it that felt like some kind of serene dance. And while full of energy, somewhere within it one could feel the silence and depth of a lake.

What are these moves?

Human; extremely human-like moves. He couldn't believe that his opponent was an Arm Slave. Throbbing muscles and the smell of sweat, a beating heart, even bones crunching- he could almost sense these in it.

But above all else, this black M9 was-

Strong...!

That's right. He was strong. He was Sousuke's equal- no, even better than him. This was the first time that he had ever met a pilot with this much skill in battle.

Lieutenant Belfangan Clouseau. What in the world was he?

Sousuke used some diversion fire and jumped in from behind.

The leaping power of the "Third Generation ASes" such as the Arbalest and M9s far exceeded that of previous models. If you put it on a human scale, it had the power to jump over a two-story house with ease. By adopting the joint structure of a grasshopper's leg, it now surpassed the explosive acceleration capability of any kind of vehicle or aircraft.

However, Clouseau's attacks were extremely persistent. The black M9 jumped up one beat later and went after the Arbalest in midair. It seemed as if they were going to collide like that, but then he caught hold of the Arbalest's ankles and-

“!?”

By the time Sousuke noticed, the sky and ground were upside-down.

Using the momentum of his own AS, Clouseau pulled the Arbalest down. The M9 then clasped around the Arbalest as it started to fall face down.

Clouseau planned to fling the Arbalest into the ground while sitting astride it like a horse.

Sousuke maneuvered his AS, and by kicking and elbowing, managed to shake his opponent off of him. The ground was close. He wouldn't make it. He turned the machine around and landed on his shoulders. The Arbalest rolled across the ground, spraying up mud. Sousuke felt the impact, that even the newest model shock-absorption system couldn't handle, throughout his entire body.

“...uh”

Among the bad-mouthing soldiers, the AS was called a “cocktail shaker”. This term came from the terrible impact that occurred during combat, when this kind of relentless treatment would befall the passenger. And sure enough, Sousuke had been the abused ice in the bartender's shaker just now.

Sousuke disregarded the pain and jumped back on the controls. He quickly checked the damage report on the screen, and turned around to face his enemy. Clouseau's M9 slowly stood up.

“Just like I thought. Sergeant Sagara, you're a second-rate pilot,” Clouseau said over the radio.

“What?”

“Your fighting style has “skill”, but no “art”. You understand what that means?”

“...”

“You don't, huh? That's why I said you're second-rate. The second-rate subordinate of your previous second-rate commander. And I've been assigned to such a team, too.”

Previous commander. He meant Captain McAllen. It seemed that he was going to keep bad-mouthing him until the end.

In front of Sousuke's watchful eye, Clouseau slowly turned around and flung his training knife away. The edge of the training knife contained paint-covered urethane foam. The tip had the same structure as a felt-tip pen. Unlike the monomolecular cutter that they used for actual combat, only paint was left on the "cutting" section, so that there would be no danger of killing your training partner.

"...?"

"Throw that toy away. Why not fight for real?"

The black M9 then pulled out a large-scale knife from the hard point on its hip. Actually, it was more accurate to call it a "small sword" instead. It had twice the length and width of an ordinary knife, and there was something ominous in the M9's look.

It was an Israeli-made monomolecular cutter, a "Crimson Edge".

It was a larger model of the "Dark Edge" series, which were widely used due to their reliability. The AS unit of the Israeli Army had taken out the Rk-92s and Mistral of the Islamic countries with these weapons. Forged in combat, they had a simple yet sturdy form that had been repeatedly modified. The "Crimson Edge" had a design that made it capable of inflicting a lethal blow on a heavily-armored enemy.

With that cutter, he would be able to sever an arm or leg of the Arbalest with just one cut, or even split the cockpit block in two.

"What's the matter, are you not going to take it out? You should have a GRAW-2 in there."

He meant the GRAW-2 monomolecular cutter that the Arbalest was equipped with.

Is he serious...?

Just as Clouseau had indicated, right now the Arbalest had a GRAW-2 stored in its equipment hatch. However, this was now crossing over the point of being just a fight to end a barroom quarrel. Fighting using expensive ASes wasn't admirable to start with, but a battle using real weapons was another story.

Surely there were no commissioned officers who would come this far to kill some time out of boredom, right? What was this guy trying to-

“Let's go,” Clouseau said, and kicking up mud, the black M9 made a dash at him.

“!”

He approached suddenly. The large, dark gray knife flashed, and came down in an arc close to Sousuke.

The moment he drew back half a body-length, he heard the ear-piercing screech of cutting metal resound. The blade of the training knife that the Arbalest was holding had been sliced in two. If Sousuke had not have moved, the cockpit area would have been sliced down the middle as well, without a doubt.

Clouseau came at him relentlessly. He swung from the bottom up, then sideways, then slashed diagonally downwards. Glaring sparks scattered as he cut into the Arbalest's armor. Sousuke could feel the ice-cold malice from these efforts.

He is serious.

No longer hesitating, Sousuke pulled the monomolecular cutter from the equipment hatch on his machine. He didn't even bother saying “Wait a minute” or “Why?” If this was how his opponent was going to be, he couldn't show any mercy either.

“That's right. No more stalling.”

Leaping out of the mud, the two went after each other.

“AI! Maximum GPL. Switch the motion manager to D1, and cancel all practice limiters!”

<Roger. GPL, maximum. Run, Delta 1. Release, all PLD.>

The AI repeated. Generator output began to rise, and the motion control software changed completely to battle mode.

<Warning. Recommend setting motion manager to Charlie 1.>

“What?”

<It is the assumption that Charlie 1 is appropriate for use of the Lambda Driver. There are six reasons for this basis. One, statistics from the previous five battles. Two, according to the developer, Bani Morauta, the initialization was C1. Three, the bilateral angle setting with regards to Delta 1 is->

“Tell me later!!”

<Roger.>

Clouseau’s M9 was approaching. The Arbalest braced for impact.

On the maneuvering ground in the fading light, the two machines violently collided.



On the large screen in the base command center, the information on the battling ASes was being projected from various angles.

Tessa held her breath as she watched the fierce fight.

The silhouettes of two machines ran around here and there in the darkening forest.

It was a dance as the large figures met with each other then moved away. Their steel extremities breaking the trees all around them-

“This is not an impressive way of doing things,” said Commander Richard Mardukas, who was standing next to Tessa. “No matter what the purpose, this reflects our tolerance of personal fights to the soldiers. It sets a bad example. Rules have to be followed.”

He pushed his glasses up and looked suspiciously at the screen. Tessa gave him a sideways glance and let out a small sigh.

“We didn’t have a choice. If we don’t try this, we probably won’t be able to draw out the Arbalest’s power...”

“Captain. That’s what I don’t understand. If they are to practice with the assumption of real combat, we should be doing it every day. Besides, why use this kind of farce? Making him pick a fight in a bar, use military equipment without permission, not to mention that it’s dangerous combat equipment...”

That’s right. This fight had been set up from the very beginning.

It had been Clouseau’s suggestion, and Tessa had approved. The provocation, contempt and fight were all to drive Sousuke against the wall. By doing so, they would be able to see whether or not he would be able to use the Arbalest’s Lambda Driver- or at the very least, be able to gather data close to its driving force- that was the intention.

“I don’t plan to take it easy on him. Please be ready for the worst, for him to die,” Clouseau had said to Tessa.

When she tried to say “There’s no point in that”, the new Lieutenant added in a cold voice:

“If he is almost killed by me, that’s his result- and the result of a piece of rubbish machine. Operations Headquarters is starting to believe that they can’t rely on that machine anymore, right?”

Tessa could not object to those discerning yet logical words. If she had said “No”, it would mean that she had no confidence in Sousuke.

Staring at the screen in the command center, Mardukas continued on.

“When you think about it from a safety standpoint, this is going a bit too far. Even though we are a group that fights for a living, we are not some petty street gang. The use of violence should be planned out and orderly, and carried out in a gentleman-like manner. This kind of uncivilized shootout is-”

“War is neither civilized nor gentlemen-like, is it not?”

Mardukas was a little surprised by Tessa’s unlikely statement.

“I guess that was a little harsh.”

“...no. You’re exactly right, Captain,” he answered, and for just a moment, a look of sadness and pity washed over his eyes.

All kinds of information was being transmitted from the relay on the Arbalest. The pilot’s heart rate and brain waves, magnetoencephalogram, infrared radiation levels, frame temperature and distortion of the AS, status of the AI, “AI”, etc... Everything was recorded, and the technical officer, Second Lieutenant Lemming, checked over it all in minute detail.

If he knew that he was being used as a guinea pig like this, what would he think?

What would he think of the one who led him into this?

He would probably hate her.

It had only been one day, but she felt that he was rapidly becoming more distant to her.

Much further than just the distance between Tokyo and Merida Island.

Bani...

The face of the boy who was no longer here crossed her mind.

Do I really blame myself? You died, and being at a loss for how to go on, I became attracted to him. That machine that you left behind has saved us many times, and I can't express my gratitude for it. But at the same time, the existence of that machine is becoming a gap between him and me. A gap that I can't fill.

Why did he have to be the one to pilot the Arbalest during the Shun On incident? Why couldn't it have been someone else?

She was actually only lost in these thoughts for a few seconds.

Tessa then took notice of Mardukas' still-discontented appearance.

“...the Lambda Driver won't work with only the stress of regular exercises. A soldier's mentality in a combat situation is very different from that of just a training situation. You know that very well, don't you, Mr. Mardukas?”

“Of course I do. I learned that in the Falklands.” Tessa remembered that Mardukas worked as a vice chief on an English Navy attack nuclear submarine at the beginning of the Falklands War in the 80's.

“Captain, my saying ‘I don't understand’ refers to why we have to go this far to see the effectiveness of that machine. A weapon that you're not sure will work when you pull the trigger is not a weapon. Can we not come up with another plan without having to rely on such a thing? Reliability is absolutely necessary with weapons systems- not innovation or destructive power.”

“Are you saying that the Arbalest is defective?”

“Yes, I am. I don't like that machine.”

She felt an ironic humor in those words. Tessa was aware that Mardukas wasn't fond of Sousuke, yet she realized that both he and Sousuke shared the exact same opinion of the Arbalest.

"Sergeant Sagara feels the same way... and that's the problem."



Offense and defense, defense and offense. The black and white silhouettes almost intertwined running through the forest, thunder and lightning streaking through the sky. A squall had blown in, bringing violent winds along with it. The foliage danced as it was whipped around by the storm.

"Terrible. Your fighting style is just terrible," Clouseau said.

"Terrible?"

"Like a tin-doll. Clumsy and-"

Coming at Sousuke from his blind spot, he attacked the Arbalest with a roundhouse kick. Sousuke stepped up, and making to ram into his opponent, forcibly softened the blow.

"Overbearing and-"

Entrusting himself to his balance coming down, the M9 did a spin-kick in mid-air. His knife also picked up the rotational speed, and this super fast attack slashed through the Arbalest's left shoulder. He lost one of the two shuttlecock-type radiation units, and the shock-absorption tank ruptured.

"...no flexibility, either."

Doing a one-handed handstand, he let loose some wild kicks almost like a whirlwind. The right foot, followed by the left. He struck the Arbalest in the neck from the side, causing it to stagger back.

“...!”

Riding the momentum as he spun around like a top, the M9 stepped firmly on the ground, back in an upright position. The Arbalest dropped back, white smoke rising from its shoulder.

“How’s that? If you use an M9-type AS, I want you to at least do that.”

“Bragging about acrobatics?”

“Oh?”

“If I were you, I would finish up first.”

“I see you still have the energy to flap your mouth... well then, I’ll give you what you want”.

While stepping lightly, the Arbalest made a straight dash at the enemy. Clouseau crouched down and avoided it, at the same time trying to cut off the Arbalest’s torso. At the last second, Sousuke twisted his hip and jumped out of the way to dodge the attack.

The truth was that Sousuke had said what he did because he was in a hurry.

Clouseau was strong. What’s more, it wasn’t just ordinary strength. He felt a kind of harmony in his movements, almost like the flow of water. Since he wouldn’t be taken in no matter what the temptation, he had seen through every feint. Also- if Sousuke showed any hint of carelessness, Clouseau’s flowing water would become a raging stream and would certainly crush his defenses.

Without letting up on his attacks, Clouseau said:

“How about you cut the crap and get serious? In Europe, there are pilots of your caliber scattered around all over the place. If you were on the SAS assault team, you’d be on a level where it’s faster to count from the bottom.”

“You were in the SAS?”

SAS. The English special military force that boasted the best efficiency and results in the world. Sousuke had wondered whether he was French-African from the name Clouseau, but-

“That kind of thing means nothing to me.”

An even more thunderous roar and vibration attacked Sousuke. Clouseau’s dagger plunged deeply into the Arbalest’s abdomen.

“-but before that, you’d better worry about your life. That coward McAllen is waiting for you.”

“...!!”

The AI began reporting damage in rapid succession.

<Warning! Generator, damaged. Extent of damage, unknown. Main power cable, severed. Secondary radiator, not functional. Abdomen actuator, damaged>

It wasn’t in the AI’s report, but it seemed the damage extended to the air-conditioning system. The smell of burning metal permeated through the normally tightly-sealed cockpit.

“What’s wrong?”

Another unforgiving blow.

“Where are you looking?”

Another merciless strike.

“Do you plan on doing something...!?”

Clouseau kneed the staggering Arbalest in the flank. The eight-ton AS went sailing backwards into the ground.

The AI’s warnings and shrill alarms went off. The shrieks of the frame, muscle and armor.

At this rate, I’ll...

Sousuke just could not think of a move that would deflect the severe connecting blows and deliver an effective hit to his opponent.

“I thought I told you to get serious!!”

The M9 jumped high up into the sky, arm raised overhead and gripping its knife backhandedly. It dived straight for the Arbalest. It was like a ferocious eagle swooping down on its prey.

In a hair's breadth, Clouseau violently thrust his dagger at the Arbalest. Sousuke intersected it with a sideways strike from his own knife, cutting the Crimson Edge right in two.

In an instant, the Arbalest used its back to spring back up into the air from its position laying face up on the ground. This maneuver was called the "Jack Knife." Because of this move, which imitated the jump of a click beetle, an AS was able to nimbly and quickly return to an upright position better than just using its arms and legs.

With a speed impossible for a human, the Arbalest at once recovered its posture while raising its own knife at the same time.

However, when he noticed, the M9 suddenly stooped down and concealed himself under the Arbalest's chest. He dropped his hips deeply, and reversed sharply- and the moment Sousuke was alerted to these unnatural movements-

“!?”

The Arbalest was pulled forwards.

In only a second, Sousuke felt almost like the direction of gravity was horizontal. Immediately following a heavy impact, the Arbalest was thrown backwards by some overwhelming power.

The eight-ton AS cut through the forest, mowing down many trees. Landing on its back, the Arbalest was then enveloped in a solid cloud of mud and sank down into the ground- white steam rolling up from it, the Arbalest feebly laid there.

“Im...”

Impossible. The shock just now.

His head was spinning and his entire body was numb because of the impact. This hadn't just been a simple hit; it was something he was unfamiliar with entirely.

Did that machine have a...?

The two eyes of the black M9 stared straight at him.

“...it can’t be,” Sousuke gasped out.

That black M9 couldn't be equipped with a Lambda Driver. The only machine equipped with a Lambda Driver that Mithril possessed was his own Arbalest. He had drawn the short straw because of that. An unreliable weapon was being forced on him, as well as duties that he was reluctant to accept-

“Stand up, Sergeant,” Clouseau said. “Try using all of the power you have in that machine. Do you understand? All-of-it. If you don’t, you’ll die the next time.”

The Arbalest stood up. Knees shaking, shoulders heaving. The damage to Sousuke’s own body was being expressed through the machine’s actions.

I have no choice but to use it...!

The Lambda Driver. The strange and unknown function of this machine that was giving him a hard time. In this kind of situation, he had no other choice but to rely on it.

But could he really use it? Wouldn’t this machine just betray him again? Wasn’t this just an absurd fight? Wouldn’t it be a good idea just to abandon the battle and run away?

“Come at me.”

“...”

He took a deep breath. Bracing both legs in an oblique stance, he came face to face with Clouseau.

The M9 kicked up the earth. The black AS drew closer.

The Arbalest brandished its right fist as if drawing a bow.

An image of power. He poured all of his destructive power into that one point-

Come out...!

He released his fist. Clouseau was moving.

In the next instant, the Arbalest, in the way of a bow and arrow, was thrown forwards. There was a violent impact to the cockpit, stunning Sousuke. The sky and ground became a nonsensical blur, and the trees and scenery rotated over and over in chaos. The moment that he struck the ground, everything went black and then he could see stars.

The AI was reporting the damage and noisy alarms were going off everywhere, but Sousuke didn't hear much of it.

"You're weak. Useless," Clouseau said. "Nothing but a pet dog after all."

"..."

It was no good.

Just as he realized this, Sousuke plunged into a deep darkness.



"Guess it's over now," Mardukas said, raising his dark-blue hat. Then taking off his black-rimmed glasses, he rubbed his tired eyes with the back of his hand. The room seemed hot.

"Just as I thought, nothing happened. This proves it's useless."

"We can't conclude that nothing happened just yet... Ms. Lemming. The evaluation?" Tessa instantaneously answered, then called out to the technical officer, Second Lieutenant Nora Lemming. She opened up the notebook computer on the seat next

to her, inspecting the data from the M9 and the Arbalest, and without taking her eyes away from the monitor, calmly replied:

“It didn’t extend to the battle on Berildaob Island. The TAROS is detecting the usual brain waves- gamma waves, but they are extremely low. The core module’s phase quantum wave interference element is changing the spectral distribution. From the N-pole of the column thalamus axis to mainly the vicinity of plain 15 in the E-region. It separates a little, in the vicinity of 90 degrees in plain 42 of the P-region.”

“Towards the blue.”

“Right. Now look at this. These two places here... they’re connected. There’s a possibility, but it’s far from triggering it.”

“...in the case of a defensive reaction, the N-region was zero plus or minus 40, right? I wonder if there’s a connection with Ms. Miller’s hypothesis.”

“That can’t be confirmed. But something that’s bothering me is-”

Mardukas could do nothing but gloomily watch as Tessa and Lemming discussed with each other in front of the 3-D images and graphs, since he did not understand anything of their conversation. He guessed that it had something to do with brain science and physics, but anything beyond that was just gibberish to him. He held a few degrees, but this discussion was well beyond his field of knowledge.

Lemming was a talent from MIT. She had no history as a military-employed civilian, but because the Arbalest had lost its developer, Tessa scouted her out. Lemming was no “Teletha Testarossa”, but she could be considered a genius. Up until now she had met with an overwhelming number of youths like her, including engineers familiar with ASES and the ECS.

For a long time, Mardukas had been seeing a malaise in the many new kinds of weapons that these young people invented. It wasn't just that unreliable Lambda Driver, either. The Arm Slaves, ECS system, palladium cold nuclear fusion reactor, *de Danaan's* super AI, TAROS, SCD, EMFC... all of it.

Only 20 years earlier- when Mardukas was still considered a young man, he would have never predicted the introduction of this kind of new equipment. It was a time when they had just started equipping missiles and fighter planes with computer-like computers. Things such as "Gigantic Robots" and "Invisibility Equipment" were only words, distrusted by a career soldier's pride. A popular game among the public, the "Invader Game," amused everyone by just moving a lowly dot across the screen.

The attack nuclear submarine that Mardukas once commanded was still one of the best warships in the world. However, in comparison to the *Tuatha de Danaan*, even that ship looked like a World War II diesel submarine.

Teletha Testarossa was an excellent girl. However, what were these vague fears that he had about the things that she and others like her produced? She, whom he himself served under, as well as that ship and this force had indeed saved many lives. But why did he want to question the foundation of their very existence?

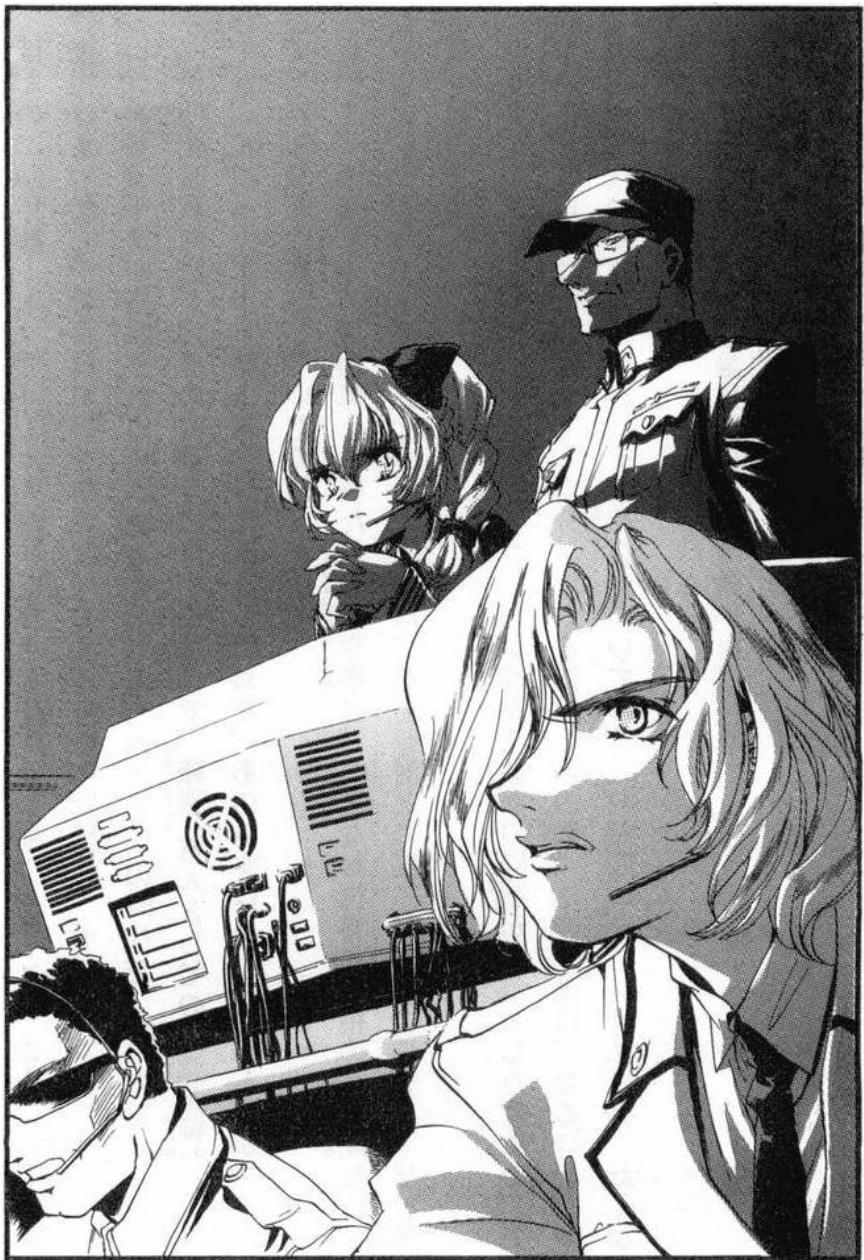
Tessa and Lemming's conversation continued for five minutes straight.

"What about observed data from the E-005 machine?"

"There is none."

"There weren't any other electromagnetic waves to consider, then?"

"Since the observational environment was limited in the first place, it can't be affirmed. The equipment was improvised. A detailed analysis will probably take some time, but..."



“Okay. Let’s first reconsider the hypothesis and reconstruct a simple model. We might be able to improve by some form,

including the problem of leaving it to the pilot. I'm looking forward to seeing it, Ms. Lemming."

"Y..yes Ma'am."

Mardukas didn't miss the look of doubt on Lemming's face. Even though she was a genius, perhaps analyzing that entire system was beyond the scope of her abilities. Lemming probably felt somewhat inferior to the girl who was much younger than her but managed to say those kinds of things very easily.

But Tessa did not notice this and turned to Mardukas.

"...I'm going to rest for a little while. If anything happens, I'll be in the medical center."

"The medical center?"

"It's the perfect place to take a nap. I also want to get a compress, since I've run out..." she said, and started to walk out of the command center. Downheartedly, and with huge strides. For someone going to rest, she looked rather in a hurry.

She's worried after all... good grief.

In other words, there was no helping that she was concerned about that Sergeant's situation.

Just as Tessa's back disappeared behind the automatic door-

"Umm, Commander?" Second Lieutenant Lemming called out from behind him.

"What is it?"

"Is Lieutenant Commander Kalinin returning to base sometime today?"

"He's supposed to. What of it?"

"Nothing. I just need to consult with him about the Arbalest. An e-mail or a direct talk... I'm a little lost."

"That's up to you, but don't trouble him more than necessary. Strange rumors are interfering with the soldiers' morale."

“O-of course... besides, that rumor is just a misunderstanding. I would like to say for the sake of the Lieutenant Commander’s honor that he and I are- ”

“I understand, I understand. That’s enough,” he said, waving his hand in annoyance. He started to head back to his own office when the sergeant in charge of communications stopped him.

“Wait, Commander.”

“What is it now?”

“Well... umm. It’s a message from Operations Headquarters in Sydney.”



“Hey, wake up, you useless, gloomy Sergeant.”

When he opened his eyes, Sousuke saw the sour face of Kurz Weber looking down at him.

“...”

Sousuke was laying on one of the beds in the medical center. A white ceiling with sterile fluorescent lights. He could vaguely recall being pulled out of the Arbalest by the technicians, but he didn’t remember anything after that.

“You went after him? Look at you. Shameful,” Kurz said, leaving the mess in the bar at the wayside. He seemed to be fine, yet at the same time the look on his face showed that he was seriously displeased.

“Lieutenant Clouseau...?” Sousuke asked, rising up. Kurz used his jaw to point him out. Just then, from the other side of the room which was separated by a curtain, walked out Clouseau. He was wearing a T-shirt and holding a rolled-up shirt under his arm, thanking the physician. He was now wearing a brand new bandage around his burly right arm.

“...”

“Your fight was an experiment. That bastard, the technology department and headquarters, all of them conspired to set it up. I also took the bait, hook, line and sinker. Dammit...”

That had been his guess. Even though they had fought for as long as they did with real weapons, the command center had not warned them or told them to stop. Even Sousuke didn't find it hard to believe that his superiors would tolerate or possibly encourage personal fights.

In other words, that AS and I are Mithril's guinea pigs.

It wasn't a new concept, was it? Just telling him “Fight”, without using a roundabout manner.

What did Teletha Testarossa think of the way he was being treated? She was probably amused, at the very least. He could imagine that much.

A young sense of defeat coiled within his chest.

That Lieutenant didn't have any kind of plan during the fight. Sousuke had lost simply because of the difference in strength. If it had been actual combat, he would now be dead. His fate had been tied to that expensive yet useless machine.

It would have been better if Clouseau had attacked him and caused serious damage to that AS. So that it would be impossible to use again. Then the responsibility would fall on Clouseau. If that were to happen, then maybe Sousuke would be sent to Tokyo again-

No. That was ridiculous. Even if the Arbalest was destroyed, they wouldn't let him resume his mission in Tokyo. It wasn't as if his superiors would change their minds. But wasn't that AS the main cause of all of this...?

Chidori...

I'm sorry. But I just wasn't strong enough. Not just for you. I couldn't even defend a dead man's honor. Or my own pride. Nothing.

Had there ever been a time when he felt this helpless?

“Here he comes,” Kurz whispered, and Sousuke came back to his senses. Belfangan Clouseau approached him.

“I see you’re finally awake, Sergeant,” he said, without showing a hint of gratitude. “Go over to the hangar, and sign the papers for the maintenance team. Then make out a practice report for earlier and hand it over to me, Lieutenant Lemming, Lieutenant Commander Kalinin and Captain Testarossa by 2500 hours. If there is even one inaccurate description or blank form, I’ll make you do it over again as many times as it takes to fix it. There will be a training drill tomorrow morning at 0600 hours in front of Hangar 1. Weber, you come, too. I’m going to retrain everyone in this unit who is qualified to pilot an AS.”

“...”

“It seems McAllen was soft on you guys, but I’m different. When you die a dog’s death, I don’t want to be blamed for incompetence. Prepare yourselves.”

Sousuke and Kurz said nothing. They had both lost to him. There was nothing they could do except put up with his contempt of the captain.

“If there aren’t any questions, you’re dismissed.”

“I have a question,” Sousuke said in a restrained voice.

“What is it?”

“...what was the attack you used to beat me? Is there a Lambda Driver in that black AS?”

Clouseau just snorted his nose.

“It was easy enough to crush you and the Arbalest without using such a thing. Meaning that in the 3rd generation AS called the ‘M9’, there is enough potential in it even when used normally.”

“Then that shock was...?”

“It’s a move that combines what the Orientals call the ‘Tooshi’ and ‘Sunkei’. You start off with a violent impact to the enemy machine that permeates into the operator, then continue on by blowing away the body. It doesn’t require something like the Lambda Driver.”

Sousuke remembered the fight in the bar. It was the same move.

From Sousuke’s position at that time, he hadn’t been able to see anything but Kurz’s jaw being hit, but there had been more to it than that.

“That trick is more than possible in an M9. You move with your enemy, steering the flow of power the way you want. Like water, or flames...”

“But the body of an AS is different from the body of a human.”

“That kind of thinking is already old. There are more than twice the number of parts in the frame of an M9-type AS compared to your average 2nd generation AS. With that complexity and elasticity, the most exquisite mechanism created by God- that is to say even the human body, won’t lose.”

“...”

“Earlier I told you that your fighting was ‘ugly’, because without being able to trust the power that the Arbalest naturally possesses, you can only handle it like a car or a helicopter.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

An AS was not a living thing. It was just a machine that followed a program to move its joints. Being called “a second body”

was nothing more than a persistent metaphor. Even though Arm Slaves had the shape of a human, they were only machines made of titanium alloy and high polymer raw materials.

“So I have to be blunt for you to get it, huh?”

Clouseau put his hands on his hips, and sighed in surprise. After that he looked straight at Souseki.

“You hate that Arbalest,” he said.

“...!”

“I know because I saw it. The way you stepped, the movements of your arms, the flow of your fists, your swordsmanship... there was doubt in each of them. There was distrust, impatience and hesitation. At first glance, they look like the moves of a pro- but they have no purpose. There’s no heart. Never mind the Lambda Driver. It’s a problem from before that.”

Each of Clouseau’s words pierced Souseki’s chest.

Clouseau was right. He did hate that machine. It didn’t show any signs of failing, but even then he didn’t trust it. He had no choice but to grudgingly entrust his life to it and fight.

And those feelings were making his attacks weak...?

The man whom he had faced as an enemy had attacked him at his core, and Souseki felt a disturbance in his heart. He wanted to resist, but could not, because what the Lieutenant was saying was probably right.

“Listen up, Sergeant.”

Clouseau leaned towards Souseki, staring straight into his eyes. He was so close Souseki could almost feel his breath. The look on his face was very serious.

“The weapons called ASes that we use aren’t just simple vehicles. They’re an extension of the soldier’s body. The pilot’s heart shows through the machine. In a high-level fight, that little bit of difference can decide victory or defeat. Know that a man

who doesn't believe in his own body or his own power will always get beaten by his enemies. That's all," he said, stressing each and every word.



Without waiting for a response, he turned around and left the medical center.

“Just great. Could they have posted a more disagreeable guy...?” Kurz muttered, knowing full well that Clouseau might still be able to hear him.

“...but there is reason in what he says. Clouseau certainly is strong,” Sousuke said, stating his honest impression of him.

“Well... in hand-to-hand fighting, sure. How he is in other stuff, we don’t know.”

“...he’s probably first-rate in other skills as well. It seems he’s from the SAS.”

“Oh really? I wonder if it was the Canadian SAS, then...”

In the countries belonging to a federation, like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, they each had an SAS that boasted the same level of degree in their respective forces. Because of the vigorous people exchange, as well as the fact that the corps chapters and reputable countries were entirely the same, from an outsider’s point of view, it was difficult to obtain that distinction.

“Now that you mention it, old man McAllen came from the Australian SAS.”

“Yeah. It really is-” Sousuke started, but stopped short.

There was Tessa, standing around in the doorway of the medical center facing the other side through which Clouseau had left. Her right hand was on the doorframe, and her left hand was holding on to her braid. Her eyes looked like she wanted to say something to Sousuke. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought her legs looked a little unsteady.

Since she didn’t say anything for a long time, Sousuke and Kurz said something first.

“...Captain?”

“Tessa?”

“...umm, I-”

Tessa had her mouth open in hesitation when the physician, Captain Goldbery, called out to her from inside the medical center.

“Ah, she’s here, she’s here. Tessa!”

“Y..yes?”

“There’s a message from Dick! He said for you to return to the command center right away!”

“Oh... understood. I’ll be right over.”

After a little hesitation, and without saying anything to Sousuke, Tessa hurriedly disappeared from the doorway.

“...?”

“What was that? Seems she came ‘cause she was worried.”

“Worried? About what?” Sousuke asked in all honesty.

Kurz frowned at Sousuke and shook his head.

“Really... If I were a scriptwriter for a soap opera, I definitely wouldn’t make the protagonist a guy like you, because the story wouldn’t progress any. And the ratings would gutter out.”

“Huh?”

◆ ◆ ◆

While looking at a map of the underground base, Belfangan Clouseau walked around the barracks for the commissioned officers, and finally located his private quarters. Without locking the door, he went inside, and piled up on the mountain of his personal effects that had been brought in by some soldiers for him.

The commissioned officers’ rooms were about the size of a regular hotel double room. It wasn’t luxurious at all, but the lights were warm and bright. It was barely furnished.

Without starting on his pile, Clouseau went to look for an empty locker or cabinet. He didn't find anything left behind from the person who had used this room up until two months ago.

He walked towards a wooden desk, and looked in the drawers. There was a faint smell of paper and cigars. In the very bottom drawer there was a worn-out Bible.

Clouseau picked up the small, leather-bound bible and flipped through it. He expected that maybe some photographs or something would be in-between the pages, but he found none.

He then opened up to a missionary verse. It was a little dirty from fingerprints on the right side of the page.

“A living dog is better than a dead lion.”

It was a phrase that Clouseau heard him say occasionally during training. No matter how much of an advocate of Islam Clouseau was, he never minded him saying it at all. Probably because- Allah forgive him- he also was fond of those words.

Captain...

He thought to himself, and closed the Bible.

He carried his belongings to the middle of the room, and then turned back in the direction of the entranceway. Next to the open door stood an Asian woman. It was Sergeant Major Melissa Mao.

“So, it was you, then.”

“That's right.”

“It's been what, a year and a half?”

“Actually, it's been six days.”

“That's right... don't bother looking for stuff of his. They finished clearing it up earlier.”

“I know.”

Turning his back to Mao, he picked up a large olive-colored bag. As he carried it to the middle of the room, Clouseau asked very curtly:

“Did... he suffer?”

“Nobody knows. No one was there when he died.”

“I see.”

He stopped for several seconds, nodding his head as if to comprehend it.

He went back and forth in the corridor many times, clearing up the baggage in the entranceway. Without even attempting to help, Mao asked:

“...that M9, it’s a D-series prototype, right? Besides the E-series machine that I’m familiar with, I remember there was a similar AS in the desk plans.”

“That’s right. There were only two of them, called ‘Falke’,^{*1} types, manufactured at the Geotron Company’s Dortmund factory. Other than a small surplus in payload, there really isn’t much of a difference from a regular E-type.”

“Is it equipped the same as the Arbalest?” she asked, and Clouseau understood why she had come.

“Does it worry you?”

“Well, I was almost killed twice by enemies who had those things.”

“That’s right. I read the reports. The answer is... no, it’s not. There were plans to, but the developer committed suicide before then.”

“So, there really is only one Arbalest in Mithril?”

“That’s right. That’s why I’m here to train you guys and that sergeant. Thoroughly.”

And they had to think of countermeasures. If the Arbalest became able to use the Lambda Driver at will, then they would be

able to research a way to oppose it even in an ordinary M9. If they reported these results to the other squadrons, they could gain an advantage over the situation with modern equipment. This was Lieutenant Commander Kalinin and Captain Testarossa's intention.

“I know, but it's not like you. It's almost Spartan.”

“I think so, too,” Clouseau said without any expression, shrugging his shoulders.

“...that guy named Sagara...”

“Hmm?”

“He reminds me of myself a long time ago. He boasts without being able to see anything around him, and tries pointlessly to fit in. He looks like he'd push himself to sit in a chair that was too small for him. Although if he worries about it, he could widen his limits.”

“I wonder if he can do that.”

“I don't know. But at this rate he'll probably end up dead.”

“...”

“Or- become a real loser.”

“Loser?”

“I'm talking about the colleagues that we normally compete with. It slowly breeds malice. First we lie to ourselves, then we resent everything around us, and in the end scorn everything in the world. Slowly. Like the hour hand on a clock, he's slowly changing. That's why it's so terrible.”

“Sousuke? That can't be.”

Clouseau didn't answer Mao's statement.

“Today wore me out. I wanna rest a little. You should go, too.”

He opened up the bag on the floor and took out a clean towel and bar of soap. Clouseau started in the direction of the shower room- then stopped at once.

“Melissa?”

“What?”

“Don’t tell anyone about McAllen and me, please. It’ll be a problem if the company holds back.”

Mao gave him a bitter smile as she started to close the door.

“As you wish... well, good night, Ben.”

“Night.”



When Tessa returned back to the command center, Mardukas greeted her with a stern face.

“I’m sorry, Captain.”

“Is there an emergency?”

“No. It’s still the matter at hand. We’ve received D-standby orders from Operations Headquarters. A B12a situation has arisen in zone J5-CS. We’ve completed correspondence protocols up to 3a, and 3b is in progress.”

D-standby was the order for the attack submarine *Tuatha de Danaan* to prepare to depart. It maintained the conditions so that as soon as the order to sortie came down, the submarine would be able to set out to sea within two hours. But it was usually the case that it was more of a “the TDD-1 might be needed, so go ahead and be ready” situation than one where they actually had to sortie. They could be on standby for a few days or a few weeks.

As for a B12a situation, that meant “destruction caused by a single, or possibly multiple ASes”. The incident in Tokyo that occurred in June- that example was somewhat unique, but- it applied here.

Terrorism by an AS. There was a foreboding feeling in this.

“You said zone J5-CS, right? Where is that?”

“Hong Kong.”



Same time, Somewhere in Hong Kong

Patrol cars passed through the main street with sirens blaring. There was a pile up in the intersection. Andy Hui’s hit song could be heard from the neighborhood shop facing the street.

In a room faintly lit by the red and green lights, a man stood.

“I’ve returned, Sin sang [sir]^{*2},” he said. “Just as you ordered, I’ve stirred up the sentries in the South army with the ‘Godard m’. I’ve also received information from my little brother in Dung Ging [Tokyo]^{*2}. The preparations have been arranged. If you so indicate, I’m sure he would strangle the girl to death at any time.”

There was no reply. In the middle of the room where someone was supposed to be, maybe something illuminated, it was pitch black. It was a darkness where light was swallowed up and never escaped again. There was a very- very profound darkness.

In the center of that darkness, something moved.

“Then tomorrow evening?” he asked, and a thick, husky mechanical voice resounded from the darkness.

“_”

“What kind of death do you want?”

“_”

“...yes, sir. Then I will tell my little brother to kill the girl called Chinniu [Chidori]^{*2}. Will that be alright?”

The dark master answered the man’s question in silent affirmation.

Translator's Notes:

1. “Falke” is German for “falcon”.
2. He is using Chinese pronunciation for these particular words, but the meaning is understood in Japanese, as well. Because of this, I translated the words out to the side for clarification. Since I am no expert on the romanization of Chinese, there may be mistakes. I've tried to use the Cantonese spelling for things since they are in Hong Kong.

Chapter 4: Her Problem

October 20th, 20:42 (Japan Standard Time)
Choufu-shi

She was just thinking a little too much.

In the end, nothing had happened, and after she returned home, Kaname thought this to herself.

She had gotten a fleeting glimpse of a strange person on the rooftop of the Sengawa shopping center- it was crazy to be as flustered as she was because of that one little thing.

Was it a warning? There was no reason to think that for certain.

That's right...

She had not been able to reach Sousuke on the phone. But what did that mean? Hadn't there been similar cases like this up until now? He would suddenly disappear from school for a day or two, and not come back. The longest he had been gone was three or four days. And then he always came back. And she was never able to get in touch with him, either.

However-

“We’re sorry, the phone number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service.”

This had not happened before now. For her to get this kind of reply meant that Sousuke had contacted the telephone company and intentionally cancelled his service. After the customer cancels, if the phone company confirms, the line will be suspended for 10 minutes without being disconnected.

She shouldn't have been able to reach him while he was overseas in the first place, right?

That idiot...

Bothering me when I'm so worried. Next time I see him, I'm going to let him have it.

Anxiety and irritation blended into drowning optimism, and her thoughts became fuzzy without dying out.

Since she didn't feel like cooking, she ate instant curry for dinner.

She turned on the television and flipped through the channels. Commercial broadcast variety programs were on. The most recent popular comedian teams would come out. They would cause problems for the delicate newcomers and amateurs and knock them around. Because they would only point and laugh at this, the subject matter seemed trashy.

She turned on her game console and resumed a game she had been playing. It was an action game where you controlled one of the latest and strongest ASes in a multinational force, and crushed terrorists' rooms. Until recently, she really hadn't been interested in games intended for boys, but she wanted to know a little bit about Sousuke's normal work- so she bought it.

But then, after she bought it, she realized that there had been no consultation for this kind of game. There were the obvious things, but the developer of this game didn't know about things like the stress of real combat, the sounds of bombs detonating or the feel of the hot winds from the explosions. Or that... strained atmosphere. Or that boiling enthusiasm just before the dread terror. Those terrible things were things Kaname knew about.

She stopped playing soon after because she was bored.

She was feeling uneasy, and no matter what she did, she couldn't concentrate. On the other hand, if she did nothing, she became restless from the boredom.

Why was she so nervous?

It would've been nice if Kyouko could have come over...

About once a week, Kyouko would stay over at Kaname's apartment. Usually, Kyouko was the one who asked, "Can I come over today?" Kaname of course welcomed her, since it was lonely living by herself. They would make dinner, watch television, lay out the futons and talk about various things. Music, sports, dramas, rumors about friends, guys at school, the future...

The phone rang.

When she looked at the clock, it was past nine. It was seven in the morning in New York. Kaname remembered the face of her little sister, who would call once every few days from overseas before she went to school, and finally smiled. If she heard her sister's voice, she might feel a little easier. She picked up the receiver and answered in the brightest voice possible.

"Hello, this is Chidori."

She waited for a response, but no one answered. She could hear a small noise coming from the other end of the silent receiver.

"Hello... Ayame?"

"..."

"It's Ayame, right?"

"..."

"...who is this?"

After a grinding noise, the phone cut off. Beep, beep, the empty electronic tone repeated over and over again. An irrepressible anxiety consumed her, and she called New York.

Her little sister answered the phone before she left for school, answering Kaname's question in a confused voice, "Call you? No, I didn't, but..."

"I see... never mind then."

"Is something the matter? Are you okay, Kaname?"

"Hm? I'm fine, it's nothing."

“You wanna talk to Dad?”

“No, it’s okay... well then, take care,” she said as calmly as possible, and hung up.

Strange.

She was really uncomfortable now. The silence of the room sank in.

She had had prank calls many times before. A complete stranger would call her cell phone and say “What are you doing now? Wanna play?” There had been one or two weird pick-up lines, as well. But that was all. But to get a prank-call tonight, at this time, of all things?

She felt helpless. She felt like someone was watching her.

Sousuke...

She dialed his number again. And just the same as before, she received no answer. Calling him wasn’t going to work.

There wasn’t some other way, was there... soon after she thought this, she remembered that there was a radio transmitter in Sousuke’s apartment.

That’s right. That radio.

She didn’t know how to work it, but the way she was right now, she would figure it out somehow. The satellite line that Mithril used incorporated a widely-used spread spectrum method modulating process with a distinct quantum code. During the incident aboard the *Tuatha de Danaan*, Kaname was able to grasp a rough understanding of these detailed systems and the frequencies they used. If she tried playing with it, it probably wouldn’t be too difficult to call Merida Island.

She wasn’t aware of how weird it was that she easily thought of this.

All right then...!

I'll use that transmitter. If I can do that, I'll talk to him.

Soon.

Kaname put on an old zip-up jacket, grabbed her key chain and left her apartment. She had never used it before, but she kept a spare key to Sousuke's apartment. "In case something happens," he said, and handed it to her six months earlier.

Maybe it was because she was finally taking some tangible action, but her mood had become a little lighter.

Her old lady sandals going pata pata, she walked across the main street separating her building from Sousuke's. In the middle of the fifth floor, room number 505. The surroundings were the same as ever. Before she opened the door, she knocked just to make sure.

Just as she expected, there was no answer.

That idiot didn't set up a bomb or something, did he?

Oh well. If she got caught in some weird trap, she would return the favor ten times over by hitting him and chewing him out good.

While Kaname thought about this, she turned the key and opened the door.

There was no trap.

But that wasn't the only thing that wasn't there.

The combat boots that he always left in the entrance weren't there. The bulletproof vest and submachine gun that he hid in the shoebox weren't there, either.

When she flipped the switch beside her, the lights didn't come on. Fumbling her way through the darkness, she entered the dining room.

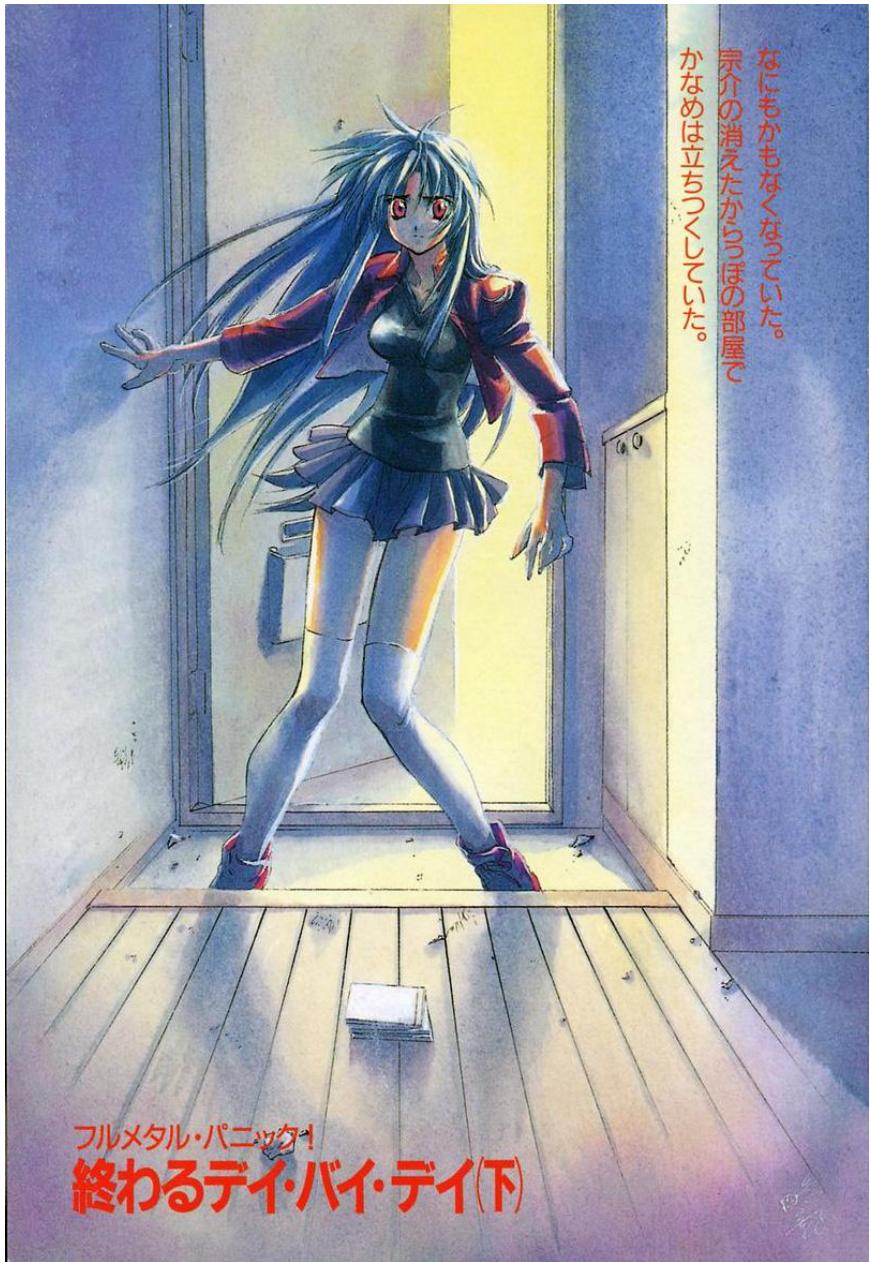
The refrigerator was gone. The table was gone. The food, chairs and television were gone, too. The ammunition box, guns, various electronics equipment, the camouflaged clothes on hangers,

knapsack, belt, sleeping bag, the photograph of his old war buddies on the wall- All of it was gone.

No. There were several CDs on the hardwood floor. She had let him borrow them just the other day. That was all, but to her they were almost like a statement, stacked up in the middle of the room. The blinds had been removed and light from the outside illuminated the room through the naked glass door. It was a pale, desolate light.

She stood there alone in the empty room, stock still, for many minutes.





**Everything is gone. Kaname stands in the empty room from which
Sousuke has disappeared.**

October 20th, 23:35 (Pacific Standard Time)
Merida Island Base, Underground Dock

Shortly after they entered D-standby, the *Tuatha de Danaan* received orders to depart.

They loaded up various materials, performed a quick check, and stored the Arbalest and black M9- alias “Falke”, which were still being repaired. This time, Sousuke and his fellow colleagues on the landing force were ordered to board the ship from the onset.

On the starboard side of the *de Danaan*, which was now completely repaired from the incident two months prior, the remaining 200 crewmembers stood in formation.

“Everyone,” Teletha Testarossa said, stepping out in front of them, “as usual, we have a mission. The *Tuatha de Danaan* will be departing from here, and will proceed with all due speed to the naval operations area non-stop. I will inform you of the destination after we depart. This will probably be an all-night job, but please try to take care not to make any mistakes. Now let us pray.”

It was an address without a scrap of bravery in it, but it was this ship’s style. Tessa grasped the mike with both hands, and recited in a gentle voice:

“God, you are our strength. With your arms that reach to the bottom of the ocean, you protect and support us even in the deepest waters-”

Her voice was as sweet and delicate as a flute solo. The Christians clasped their hands in front of their chests, and the others prayed in silence.

“-night or day, in the silence and depth of the ocean as well as on the surface of the water, you are with us. God, amidst the confusion of our trials at sea, when we call out to you, you listen...”

She finished the prayer on a lingering note and said “Now then, please report to your posts.”

“You heard her! All senior officers and sailors, report to your posts!” the officer on duty shouted, and the crew came alive all at once, climbing aboard the small mountain that was *Tuatha de Danaan*.

They started the palladium reactor from an external power supply. The underwater radiation opening let out a faint, long breath. The mooring ropes and electric power cables were unfastened. The hydraulic rock bolts fixed on the ship revolved slowly as they separated. Every hatch buzzed as it shut, and the departure siren resounded throughout the large underground dock.

They closed up the front of the underground dock, and the enormous gates began opening with a thunderous roar. The scene was almost as if a building had started to move. Before the open gates was a huge cave reinforced by innumerable steel supports. The *de Danaan*’s path continued for several hundred meters before reaching the sea. The rippling water rising inside the cave reflected the lights from the mercury lamps.

Accompanying the vice chief, and with a brisk gait, Tessa entered the ship’s central command center.

“Good work. I will take over from here.”

“Aye Ma’am. Captain on the deck!” announced the officer on duty. Without sitting down, Tessa looked attentively at the display on the front screen. Over the intercom, every station reported the results of the final inspections. No problems. This was consistent with the display on the screen.

Mardukas gave a little nod.

“Everything confirmed, Captain.”

“Then commence departure. Normal propulsion. Ahead at 1/3 speed.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am. Normal propulsion, ahead at 1/3 speed!”

It was as if the ship were gliding through the water.

Without betraying the enormous power hidden within the several thousand ton ship, they quietly and calmly set out to sea.



October 21st, 12:40 (Japan Standard Time)

Choufu-shi, Tokyo

Jindai High School

The face of a completely exhausted woman reflected back from the restroom mirror.

There were dark rings underneath her bloodshot eyes, her black hair was scraggly, and her skin was firm. She also had a pale complexion and chapped lips.

This woman who looked to be in her thirties and to have led a tough life was wearing a high school uniform.

I look terrible...

She had barely gotten any sleep since yesterday. She spent the night crouched against the wall, the smallest sounds scaring her so much she shook. Because she couldn’t stand the silence of her room, she left the television on. There was something about the evacuation of the citizens in Hong Kong or something on the late night news, but since she wasn’t interested, she changed the channel. She watched an infomercial for some American product instead.

Today’s product is the revolutionary weight-loss tool, Fit X. It may look like just an ordinary chair at first glance, but with just 20 minutes a day, you can maintain a beautiful and healthy body. “Fit X was the best! You know, from just this one machine, you

can do 12 different types of exercise. Thanks to Fit X, when I met with my friend John who I hadn't seen in a year, he said 'Whoa! Are you really Danny? I don't believe it. You look so different!' I have to thank Fit X," said Daniel, a computer technician. Fit X. Fit X. To order Fit X, call right now!

Kaname saw the smiling faces of Daniel and others as the sun rose.

"Weight loss, huh..." she said to herself as she stared in the mirror.

I might end up super thin before long even without the help of a machine, she thought.

It seemed that her classmates noticed that something was unusual with her. Kyouko and the others wore looks of concern on their faces, saying "You should go to the hospital." Since there was no avoiding it, Kaname went ahead and told everyone "It's just a cold." She thought of explaining the situation and asking for help, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Really, it was impossible to tell them.

Tell them that Sousuke might not come back. That the war-maniac guy everyone knew was really an active and very, very elite soldier, and that his real purpose in coming to this school was to guard her. And that the one who was responsible for everyone getting involved in the serious incident on the fieldtrip was no one other than herself. And so on.

She couldn't do it. She didn't have enough courage.

The bell rang over the intercom throughout the school. Then came the voice of her homeroom teacher, Eri Kagurazaka, calling out Kaname's name.

"-ame Chidori please come to the faculty room. I repeat: Will second-year group four Kaname Chidori please come to the faculty room."

She thought about ignoring it at first, but then reconsidered. She stared into the mirror, but the bad feeling that she had kept getting worse.

Plodding along, Kaname made her way to the faculty room.



“...are you okay?” Eri awkwardly asked as soon as she saw Kaname’s face.

“Yeah, I just didn’t get much sleep.”

“I see... you shouldn’t do that, you know? Even if you do live by yourself, you shouldn’t stay up all night.”

“You’re right. Ha ha ha...”

“Anyway, there’s a situation, but...”

Reaching into her desk drawer, Eri took out an envelope with the seal broken. The address on it was to Jindai High School. Kaname recognized the messy handwriting.

“It seems that this arrived for the office from Mr. Sagara. And... try not to act surprised when I tell you,” she said, keeping her voice down. “In the letter, he says he’s dropping out.”

“...”

“I know that he’s missed a lot of school recently, but... dropping out all of the sudden without any explanation? It seems they can’t contact him by phone, either... I’m not sure what I should do... I just kept giving him down the road recently for the car and for missing school without an excuse... perhaps I... no, I’m sure there are more complex issues at stake-”

Kaname didn’t hear most of what Eri was disclosing to her.

She wasn’t surprised. *Ah, I knew it...* was the only thing she thought.

She didn't cry, either. The grief of abandonment, the anger of it ending so soon, even the amusement that stirred up memories, none of these came gushing out. Without feeling anything at all, she just stood still like someone senile, staring at the worn-out envelope on the top of the desk.

“-also... Miss Chidori? Miss Chidori?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any information?”

If this had been a manga^{*1} or something, about here would be the scene where she would yell out “I can’t tell you the reasons, but I believe in him. Sousuke will definitely come back!” as if it were her business. But as sad as it was, being a complicated being of flesh and blood- she wasn’t so simple a person to blindly believe such a thing.

“I don’t have any information.”

“...”

“...because I don’t know anything about it,” she answered in a monotone voice. Eri looked up at her with doubtful eyes.

“Have you two had another fight?”

“No.”

“...if we can’t get in touch with him by tomorrow, the principal will have to accept his letter.”

“That’ll mean he’s dropped out?”

Eri didn’t say anything.

Kaname took this silence as an affirmation.

“I see. I’ll be going then...”

And with mechanical movements, Kaname turned about-face and left the faculty room.

Just give it up. He was just an illusion. Him saying “I’ll protect you” was just a lie. That was how reality was.

He just disappeared. He and everyone attached to him as well. There was no one she could depend on anymore. Would she have to continue living everyday in fear of the shadow she couldn't see? The people targeting her wouldn't show any mercy. Spies, terrorists, secret associations- those people.

No.

She had to think of a plan. By herself. She absolutely could not involve Kyouko.

Remember.

Am I one of those heroines trapped up in the top of a tower, just spending everyday sighing? A princess whimpering because her prince or valiant knight on a white horse had left?

She was completely different.

I'm going to act. Because I'm Kaname Chidori.

There was something in her biology- more than just the "Whispered" part, but something even stronger by nature, and it seemed to be strongly provoking her.

First, she needed information. She had to be aware of her surroundings and what might happen.

◆ ◆ ◆

October 21st, 19:48 (Pacific Standard Time)
West Pacific, Off the Philippine Coast
Tuatha de Danaan

Because they were ordered to board the *Tuatha de Danaan*, the training and meetings for Sousuke and the others were carried out on the ship.

The meeting for the SRT unit was over advanced technical matters. The platoon tactics using the M9 data link function, three-

dimensional maneuvers in limited efficiency, the organic hookup plays in complexity. Everything covered had the Venom in mind.

What's more, the technician, Second Lieutenant Lemming, dragged out the explanation of the Venom's weak points, using difficult terms and lots of diagrams.

“-as for problems with the Lambda Driver... other than engineering factors, there are also physiological factors. The function of the LD is greatly influenced by the pilot's state of mind. When the apparatus was operational, there were very unusual brain waves detected from the pilot- right here. These fast waves from 30 to 50 KHz are called gamma waves. It seems that only when the steady levels of strength in the brain waves are exceeded can the LD expand the area of repulsion- please take a look at this data. The data so far says that the pilot himself can initiate these strong gamma waves, but that there is difficulty in continuing and raising them. Until recently, there was doubt as to its very existence. By administering the synthetically possible drug ‘Type Ti970’ only in the very confined chemistry plant, artificially, a similar response was drawn out- but this does not take into account the subject's personality or the various negative influences present in his personality, such as memory defects, schizophrenic disposition, visual hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, persecution complex and the violent mania. In the short term, there is a decline in migraines and eyesight, as well as a loss in equilibrium-”

Starting with Kurz, the rest of the bored SRT members asked in unison:

“In other words?”

“That use of the LD for an extended period of time is probably impossible, with the exception of the ‘Behemoth’.”

“Then you should have said that from the start...”

After that, Clouseau dismissed the meeting, ordering everyone present to check their equipment and then get something to eat afterwards.



After inspecting weapons with Kurz and the others, Sousuke went to the ship's hangar by himself.

In the corner of the hangar where the ASes were kept knelt the Arbalest, just now finished with repairs. Because the ship was currently under noise regulation status, adjustment work could not be performed.

The Arbalest was surrounded on all four sides by poles and ropes, with the sign "Do Not Enter" hanging from one of them.

Before, up until it was used in the Shun On incident, this machine had been brought into the corner of the hanger in a container. Sousuke also had not known the contents of that container, and could only imagine that there had been an AS inside.

Stepping over the rope with the "Do Not Enter" sign, Sousuke approached the Arbalest.

It had frosted white, sleek armor that felt a little rough to the touch. But even gently brushing it like this didn't stir up any feelings of affection for it.

"..."

Stepping up onto the armor, Sousuke agilely climbed up the torso. He opened the hatch, slipping into the cockpit.

Using reserve power, Sousuke started the machine's control system. The display lit up. Gripping the stick and operating the thumb pointing device, he selected various modes.

Control Mode- Test Use. All Vetronics- Idle. All Sensors- Idle. The Machine Settings Screen. Main Menu. [AI] Chosen. The

AI Settings Screen. [Training] Chosen. The Training Settings Screen. [Other] Chosen. The Other Settings Screen. Change to [Conversation/Free]. Executed.

He pushed the voice input switch on the stick on the left-hand side.

“AI.”

After a small time-lag, a man’s deep voice replied:

<Check. Confirming Sergeant Sagara... yes, Sergeant.>
Silence.

The AI, “AI”, didn’t say anything more than necessary. If Sousuke didn’t say anything, then it would stay like this forever. Even Sousuke had nothing in particular to talk about. He just wanted to try it.

He didn’t believe that just talking to the AI would dissolve his grudge against the machine, but he wasn’t satisfied just standing around in the waiting room. He had thought of maybe writing a letter to Kaname, but he didn’t know what to write. He was also reluctant to talk to Kurz and the others.

He wasn’t comfortable no matter where he went.

So he dared to come here. The place where he felt the most uncomfortable- this cockpit.

“...how are you?” he tried asking for the time being.

<The check performed at 1730 hours today was satisfactory. Check performed by Lieutenant Sachs, security record number 981021-01B-F-001. Do you wish to inspect the security record? Or perform another check?>

Since it was not a combat situation, it stopped at the details. When he was silent, Al continued:

<-in the case of a second check, the current settings need to be changed. End training mode, and after connecting the unit to an external power source, please execute the arbitrary check list.

Additional Items. This unit, starting from the total check at 1730 hours, cannot undertake another complete maintenance without engaging in a complete mission.>

“I only woke you up on a whim.”

<Training Message. Please explain the meaning of the world ‘Whim’.>

“Try guessing on your own.”

<Roger. Complete. Report results of guess?>

“Go ahead.”

<The meaning of ‘Whim’. The most probable candidate- a concept similar to ‘Discretion’ or ‘Doubt’. Second candidate- a concept similar to ‘Zeal’ or ‘Diligence’. Third candidate- a concept similar to ‘Confusion’ or ‘Irregularity’.>

The next guesses after the fourth candidate were displayed in a row on the screen. “Idleness”, “Crisis”, “Ambition”, “Play”...

“Do you understand ‘play’?”

<Affirmative. That is the meaning of ‘whim’?>

“It’s close to ‘play’ and ‘irregularity’.”

<Roger. Thank you for the information.>

“Tell me the meaning of ‘play’,” Sousuke asked out of curiosity.

<Tactically, its action is meaningless, but strategically its action is beneficial. It is not an essential thing like eating or sleeping, but it comes next in rank of importance. Through this action, humans maintain human characteristics such as flexibility, expression, and vitality. Examples of ‘play’ are ‘songs’, ‘dance’, ‘poker’, and ‘Go’.*2. Examples of words similar to ‘play’ are ‘hobby’, ‘joke’, and ‘love’.>

This was the first AI to give him that kind of reply. The AI of the M9 that Sousuke piloted before definitely would not reply like this. It was only natural. It was pointless for the control system

of an ordinary weapon to know what play was. It was a waste of storage cells.

“Who taught you that kind of thing?”

<Manager Bani Morauta, Sergeant.>

Sousuke remembered that name. He had died before the Arbalest was completed.

“The technician who made you?”

<Affirmative. He was the creator of the ARX system that was included in me.>

AI used the word “me” as a matter of convenience. An AI has no self-awareness.

“Tell me what you know concerning Bani Morauta.”

<Bani Morauta. Male. Assigned Mithril’s Research Department. ID number F-6601. Rank, Captain status. Wage class, MJ-3. Creator of the System ARX-7. Age, presumed 16. Height, presumed 166 centimeters. Additional Information. Registered in California High School and Geotron Electronics Company. Visited Copenhagen. Hobbies are Go and piano. Favorite singer is John Lennon. Favorite things are peace, AI, and Teletha Testarossa. Record blank dating February 16th of this year.>

Even though he was a little surprised when Tessa’s name came up, Sousuke pressed on.

“And his death?”

<Unknown. That information has not been enter->

There was a noise. AI’s voice paused, and the screen blacked out.

Even though the stick was operational, there was no response. He thought maybe the reserve power had been cut off, but the lamp below the screen was still green.

“AI?”

Silence. One second. Two seconds. Three seconds. Then, without notice, the terminal screen came back on.

<Check. SGT Sagara confirmed- training message. He is dead?>

This was a strange response. Even though other settings were still in the training mode's free conversation, why was it retrying only his voice print check...?

“That's what I heard... Stop rejecting each training message one by one.”

<Roger. Please tell me the source of this information.>

“I heard it from Second Lieutenant Lemming.”

<Please tell me about his death.>

This was definitely strange.

“...you think I know?”

<Please excuse me. I will assume you do not have that information.>

“Does it bother you?”

<Are you asking 'Are you interested in his death?'>

“Yes.”

<Affirmative. I have a comprehensive interest concerning the aspects of everything, from tactics to planning. Without Bani Morauta, completion of the ARX system will be difficult.>

“Are you saying that you recognize that you aren't complete?”

<Affirmative. And that has been the primary problem for you, as well.>

Sousuke didn't get mad at his mechanical partner, but he was surprised by this answer.

“...what did you say?”

<You are one piece of the ARX-7 system. Without your ability, the ARX system is not complete. Please tell me your

problem. If I can answer, I might be able to give some kind of advice.>

He couldn't believe what the machine was saying. Sousuke seriously suspected that someone was remotely controlling Al and making it say these things.

“I don't have a problem.”

<I don't believe that.>

“Why?”

<My ‘intuition’.>

When Sousuke heard this, he suddenly felt ridiculous. He didn't know whose prank it was, but someone made the machine say “intuition”. Clouseau, or Lemming, maybe. He wasn't sure, but it seemed that someone thought he was fairly stupid.

“Then explain this ‘intuition’. And leave out the tricks.”

<Your order is nonsense. ‘Intuition’ is not controlled or an object of persuasion. It is something that comes from the depths of the soul.>

“What you're saying is also nonsense,” he said, and tried to end training screen. He moved the free conversation mode cursor to ‘off’, but when he tried- it didn't work. There was no response.

<I am sorry, Sergeant, but you are no longer able to alter that item.>

“What are you saying?”

After a short pause, Al said:

<Relaying Bani's message. Please pay attention... ‘The flag has been raised. This is the worst case scenario concerning me personally, since it means that I am either dead or disabled. I decided to leave this device in case of that event for Al's future master. He is no longer an ordinary AI. He is an existence with a symbiotic relationship with the Lambda Driver. He is still a

tottering child on unsteady legs, but he is able to learn even pleasure and sorrow. Please trust him as a partner.'>

“Wha...”

<“Perhaps present circumstances and your intentions are trying to move in different directions. You are probably irritated by it. But you are not powerless. The Arbalest is one possibility. Naturally, while you aren’t able to do anything, this strong machine becomes just a piece of scrap iron and could very possibly mean the end. That depends on you. Express yourself as your heart tells you. I pray this for you and the important ones you have to protect.’ ...that is all.>

The flag has been raised? Device? Al was not a normal AI?

Also- this defective machine was the “strongest”? This AS, that always fought a hard fight against a single machine, and then was barely able to scrape out a victory?

“Impossible...”

<Do you mean me? Or do you mean you?>

“If you’re mocking me, stop. After this, I’m-”

“Sousuke!? Are you there?” Mao called from outside of the cockpit.

Sousuke ended his conversation with Al and leaned out of the hatch. Mao was looking up at him from next to the Arbalest’s feet.

“What is it?”

“The Lieutenant Commander called for us. It’s a mission.”



October 21st, 18:20 (Japan Standard Time)
Tokyo, Japan

When she went home that night, Kaname packed some clothes, a bath set and some other things into a Boston bag, and still wearing her school clothes, went out. She couldn't stand spending the night in her apartment alone.

She walked along the road to the train station, feeling like she was being watched by someone, while at the same time feeling like she was thinking too much.

No, she couldn't be thinking too much.

Someone was definitely watching her. Whether by the "Shadow Guard" that Tessa mentioned before, or some villain like that Gauron guy. At any rate, she didn't trust either of them. Anyway, just their existence was significant to Kaname, since there was no changing the fact that the person who was sticking with her was her only source of information.

She would walk for a bit, then suddenly look back. She tried this several times, but there really was no point. It wasn't like there was a shadowy figure in a trench coat standing behind a telephone pole. This guy wasn't a clumsy detective from a television show; he was a pro.

Where should I go? she contemplated over and over.

What about going into a secluded mountain? It was two hours by train to Okutama. No, a mountain recess was no good. Her follower might be able to find her, and at the same time it might be difficult to give him the slip or outsmart him.

At any rate, if the person after her was really a bad person...?

A mountain recess was definitely out. If something were to happen, then she wouldn't be able to call for help and there wouldn't be any eye-witnesses. It was too dangerous.

A busy area would be good, but one far away from her apartment or school. Some place she wouldn't normally go. A place where it would be difficult to attack or kidnap her, and hard to follow her.

For now, Kaname decided to go to Shibuya.

At the Keiou Line's Meidaimae Station, when she changed to the Inokashira line going to Shibuya, she jumped off of the train just before the door closed. It was something she had used on Sousuke before, but she didn't see a suspicious person panicking and trying to get off. There were only a lot of passengers walking in groups to the Inokashira platform.

There was no sign of someone at all. Without meaning to, she started to think that what she was doing was foolish. Like a child playing make-believe spies.

I'm not being stupid. I'm not being stupid...

She took the Inokashira line to Shibuya. Already the sun was setting, but the streets were still covered with people.

She ate at McDonald's, then browsed through an accessory shop and boutique. She wandered through a CD store and a bookstore, strolled through Tokyu Hands, and went to a game center.

No matter where she went, though, she paid close attention to whether there were suspicious people in her surroundings, but to no avail.

They might be watching her from outside.

When she thought of this, Kaname went to a worker at the game center and said "A strange old man is bothering me," and he let her use the back door. She went into the darkened alley, turning

around and taking a detour into a boutique not too far away. She hurriedly went up to the second floor, and from a window with a good view, observed the vicinity around the game center.

She couldn't find anyone suspicious. There was too much pedestrian traffic. Even after carefully examining the area for more than five minutes, she found absolutely nothing.

No good, huh...

What would Sousuke do at a time like this?

She had no idea. Sometimes, with skill that only looked like magic to an amateur, he was able to see through enemies, pursuers, and all kinds of dangers. Of course, he had made many mistakes. That was always the cause of trouble. But at the same time, there hadn't been one time that he had missed a real threat.

Battle sense, would you call it? She was keenly aware that it was something she lacked.

She didn't know. She hadn't found anything. Even though she had tried to be so watchful, she couldn't feel any traces of someone at all. If she thought about it sensibly, it might be the perfect time to conclude "just as I thought, there isn't anyone watching me."

However, there was some utility value in her existence. There was no mistake about that.

She couldn't oppose this reality no matter what.

Supposedly, she was being watched. And supposedly, she was being followed. They said that, but...

A sad melody was playing inside the shop. A piece from Dvorak's "From the New World." The sun sets into the far mountains, was what that melody meant. Somehow it was like a closed shop. When she checked the clock, it was already 9 o'clock.

She left the boutique. Still not having been hit by any particular ideas, Kaname wandered around through the middle of

town. She saw groups of drunken people, and the number of shops with closed shutters had increased.

It would probably be a while before the city would sleep, but without knowing where to go, she got lost.

In front of Hachiko^{*3}, where people had just started to thin out, Kaname sat down while holding her bag.

She sighed. She had just decided what she should somehow do this afternoon, but she had quickly come to a standstill.

When she thought about it, there was no way that an amateur like herself could outsmart a professional tracker. The truth of the matter was that even when she had left the game center through the back door, he had probably been able to predict it.

No... but, isn't it strange?

No matter what the situation, would he be able to see through her movements that easily? He didn't have super powers. Was he using some kind of device...?

...a transmitter?

She no longer had the necklace with a transmitter on it that she had received from Sousuke and the others earlier. She had left it in her room. But what if there were something else other than that somewhere on her...? A device so small that she wouldn't notice, hidden in an ingenious way...?

It was possible. If he had done that, then no matter what she did, she wouldn't be able to outsmart him. It should be possible to make a transmitter that works within a 100 meter radius small and hard to see.

Maybe in her bag?

Or accessory case? Or the accessories themselves?

On her clothes? Or in her purse? Or wristwatch?

Or maybe it was something that she could easily see to start with?

As for temporarily inserting such a transmitter, there had to be a sneaky way of doing it, right?

Think... think...

Thinking. That was the only weapon that could help her right now.

A cold wind blew through Hachiko, whipping her hair around. It would be November soon. Tonight's weather forecast said that the temperature would drop to about as cold as the beginning of December and that there would be rain. Unpleasantly chilly for someone wearing only a high school uniform.

Just then, someone called out to her.

“Hey, are you alone?”

When she looked up, she saw what looked like a business man standing there. He looked to be in his thirties. His tie was unfastened, his face was a little red, and he was giving her an oily smile.

“Are you waiting for someone?”

“No...” she answered honestly because she had been wrapped up in her thoughts. When she did, the man suddenly approached her, speaking in a coaxing voice.

“Heeeh, is that so? In that case, why don't we go get something good to eat? My treat.”

“I'm not hungry.”

“You don't say? Well, then, what about a drink? I know a place with a nice atmosphere.”

“I don't drink...”

“I see. But you're looking kinda lonely there. I can't just leave you alone. You don't have to drink alcohol, but why don't you try telling me what's bothering you? I'm sure you'll feel better for it. Don't worry, I won't take you anywhere weird.”

Liar. He was planning on sweet talking her, getting wasted, then taking her somewhere shady to try something with her. Those types had tried picking her up many times before now, and she was a veteran of refusing their advances.

Kaname took a deep breath, and with a raised voice, started to say “Hey you...! I’m in the middle of something right now-”

But then she stopped.

A light came on inside her head. It was a crazy idea- but her companion would never be able to guess as much.

“Hmm? What?”

After staring at his face, she said:

“...hey mister. Why don’t we go to a hotel?”



October 21st, 21:14 (Pacific Standard Time)

Off the Philippine Coast, Underwater

Tuatha de Danaan

There was one member of the PRT (Primary Response Team) in the empty briefing room other than Kalinin and Clouseau. He was a Chinese Private by the name of Wu. He was qualified to pilot an AS, and for the time being was in training to pilot an M9.

They were watching a news program on one section of the wall screen. It was England’s BBC. It was probably something they had intercepted within the past few hours. The place was Hong Kong, next to a park facing the harbor area. Beneath an orange street light, a Caucasian reporter was speaking very fast.

“-stationed troops on either side still have not made an announcement concerning the whereabouts of the unknown AS. These implications have meant that town businesses and street

vendors have suspended commerce, and the neighborhood of Mong Kok has become strangely quiet-”

Behind the reporter, there was a shot of a dark green armored car as well as an Rk-92 type AS on the other side from the thighs down. Those dangerous images matched well with the strained atmosphere of the street.

“Where’s Yang?”

“He’ll be here soon,” Mao answered. Just as she did, Yang rushed in wearing a tank top and carrying a towel.

“Sorry I’m late...!” he panted.

“Okay, that’s everyone. Let’s get started,” Clouseau said to everyone. Somehow, it seemed he only had business with the four soldiers gathered here. If one observed, Mao, Yang, Wu, and Sousuke were all of Asian descent.

“...I think you all know by now, but an unknown AS has appeared in Hong Kong. It is believed that this unit will independently repeat its destructive activities, and is hiding somewhere in the city even now. The North and South Army are both receiving damage, and Divided Hong Kong is currently in a critical state of tension.”

Divided Hong Kong. That’s what today’s Hong Kong was often called. Several years before, with the Chinese coup that occurred, and the effects of a continuing civil war, this prefectoral city was now under two ruling powers.

The continent and the adjoining peninsula of Kowloon was the Chinese Democratic Alliance- popularly called “South China”.

The southern part of Hong Kong was the People’s Liberation Committee- popularly called “North China”.

Even now these two groups had continuing skirmishes with the Hubei province among others, but Hong Kong in particular was under a pact that controlled every act of war. Both groups had

stationed a large number of battle forces in the provincial city, and they continued to confront each other at a distance the length of a rifle's shot.

“This AS, is there really only one?” Yang asked, drying his wet hair with the towel.

“As far as we can confirm, there's only one. But we can't be certain because of complications with intelligence.”

“What type is it?” Mao asked, and Clouseau switched the screen.

It was a relatively clear picture- probably a civilian photograph- when Mao saw it, she gave a little groan. Sousuke also, without thinking, took a deep breath.

“That's why we've been called, huh?”

The machine in the photograph was the same type as the Venom. It had a massive upper body, as well as linear but strangely distorted camouflage.

The location was a stereotypical Hong Kong commercial district. It was vaguely enshrouded by white smoke. The problem AS was violently twisting one of the numerous projecting signboards with its left hand, while at the same time leveling its Bullpup-style assault rifle at the right side of the screen. The picture was fairly close, like it had been shot from underfoot, and looked like photographer was worried immediately after.

“What's the terrorist's target?”

“Unknown. No one has claimed responsibility. If we had to venture a guess, it's probably to revive the civil war or destroy the Hong Kong economy. Or possibly-”

“Possibly?”

“They might be issuing a challenge to us.”

“...”

They didn't want to think about it, but it was very possible. Based on events that had happened so far, it was obvious that the enemies who possessed these machines were strongly sensible of the existence Mithril and the *Tuatha de Danaan*.

“This picture was taken in the Yamauti neighborhood, the town area on the side of the Kowloon peninsula. After the enemy AS destroyed one of the South China Army’s armored vehicles, it used a smoke bomb and disappeared. This was 26 hours ago.”

He continued by projecting an enlarged map of Hong Kong.

“Afterwards, the ‘Venom Type’ has appeared in various places throughout Hong Kong and Kowloon every 8~12 hours, indiscriminately causing destruction. It looks like 10 ASes in the vicinity have been destroyed and a large number of people have been wounded or killed. Neither army has been able to crush this machine, let alone gather information or find any trends. If we look at previous examples, this is probably because this machine is also equipped with a concealing function.”

“Then it can’t be found using the Chinese Army’s equipment...”

“They don’t have information about the advanced model ECS. They probably don’t guess that the enemy is becoming invisible and hiding.”

“Were they warned about that?”

“No. The higher-ups didn’t want to.”

“Why?”

“Granting that the results of temporary advice or technical support would be that both armies would be able to see this enemy AS- they still wouldn’t be able to oppose the ‘Venom Type’ with their equipment. It would only lead to more deaths. We’re the ones who deal with the extermination of pests.”

The point that Kalinin had brought up was quite right, but there was also a cold-hearted logic at work as well, Sousuke's instincts told him. If they gave information about the latest model ECS to the North and South China Armies, then the scope of Mithril's power would be evident, since they also used the same equipment. Mithril's secrecy relied heavily on a practical new model ECS.

“And so...?”

“Even though it's Venom, we can't carry out a full operation within 24 hours single-handedly. We will need a supply of ammunitions and simple adjustments for after battle. The pilots, too, will need some rest. First, we will calculate the ambush destination for that purpose, secretly surround it with one platoon of M9s, do a surprise attack and take control. There are no countermeasures, because there is no obligation to oppose it straight on. It is for that reason that I want you all to perform reconnaissance.”

“Reconnaissance?”

“In cooperation with the Intelligence Department's branch office in Hong Kong. Using the necessary know-how, locate the enemy's hideout. We'll surface sometime tonight, and then you'll take a helicopter. You'll fly one step ahead of us to Hong Kong.”

“Sousuke, as well?” Mao asked. In this situation, she probably thought it was normal for Sousuke to remain on the ship for the time being on standby with the Arbalest. Clouseau looked as if he were about to say something in response to Mao's question, but before he did, Kalinin opened his mouth.

“That's right.”

“...”

“It is the policy that the Arbalest will not be used this time. For those reasons- do you understand, Sergeant Sagara?”

“Yes, sir,” Sousuke answered in a dispirited voice. –



Same Time
Maruyamachou, Shibuya, Tokyo

“How’s this place?” the middle-aged man asked when they reached ‘Love Hotel Hill’ in Dougenzaka.

He was pointing to a hotel painted in chic colors with a “vacancy” sign lit up. The signboard said “Hotel Diversion”. Renting the room was 5500 yen for two hours, and 9000 yen per day.

The rain, which had been sprinkling since earlier, was gradually becoming heavier. Soon it would probably turn into a torrential downpour.

It wasn’t more than 100 meters from the business district, but this area was quiet and deserted. The only people they passed were couples (*why is everyone either walking in small steps or half running?*). There was almost no one walking by themselves. A single partner or a man by himself stood out.

“Ooh... that’ll do.”

Without thinking, she clinched her fists.

When he saw that, the middle-aged man- Kamoi, he called himself- looked a little dubious, but pulled himself together and put his hand on Kaname’s shoulder.

“It’s okay? Yeah, okay. Then let’s go. Alright? Alright?”

“Wait a second.”

She slipped out from under his hand, and trotting in front of the love hotel, she briefly checked out its exterior. She looked

around the surrounding area, and checked how it was situated in relation to the other buildings.

“Okay. Let’s go in.”

“Alright, Mizuki. I’ll try my best, ha ha ha...”

Mizuki was the alias that she had quickly thought up.

Sorry, Mizuki... Kaname thought apologetically to her friend.

Taking long strides and leaving the high-spirited man by himself, Kaname went through the entrance of the hotel. The cheap automatic door rattled open. The lights inside were dim. It didn’t have the large lobby like a regular hotel; the ceiling was low, and the pathway was narrow.

There was a reception desk, as well as a strange lit-up board across from a small corner. It was about half the size of a school blackboard, and it had pictures of 40 guest rooms lined up on it. Under each picture was the room number, a red light and a button, about half of which were lit up.

...what’s this?

She thought blankly. As ideas of what it would be used for swam around in her head, Kamoi caught up with her.

“What kind of room would you like?” he asked.

Ah. In other words, you chose the room with these buttons. Pictures without the lights on probably meant that those rooms were “in use”.

In use...

She suddenly came back to herself.

Am I serious? Coming to such a place, it’s not the least bit decent. It’s not too late, I can change my mind. I can leave this kind of love hotel. No, no. If I do that, I won’t make any progress. Problems with morals or chastity are on a whole other level. Those words that he used often- “a security issue”. That’s why this might

be the breakthrough. Don't chicken out. Use your head. Come up with something.

It was a short conflict. Kaname calmed down her feelings and checked one of the vacant rooms. After that she carefully scrutinized the structure of the love hotel that was on an “in case of disaster” sketch of the building next to the check board. The location of the room. The location of the window. Which way was North... good.

“Room 202.”

“Eh? There are better rooms, you know. That one looks a little small-”

“Then I'll go home.”

“Ahh- I was joking, joking. I'm sorry, that'll be fine. Okay? Okay?” Kamoi said, trying to pacify her. He had absolutely no dignity.

They pressed the button, took the keycard and headed to the second floor.

There was an elevator right next to room 202. As she halfheartedly answered her partner's small talk of “Which school has that uniform you're wearing?” and “It's okay to just relax,” Kaname entered the room.

This is surprising. It's not that bad after all...

She thought at first glance.

The lighting was bright, the furniture was new, and every nook and cranny was clean. There was even a large screen LCD television and audio set. She had thought that a love hotel would be more shabby and indecent.

But of course, the most prominent thing in the room was the huge double bed in the corner. Beside the bed was a tissue box and- ahh, that's enough.

It works. Anyway, time to explain the situation to the old man.

“Now then, I have something I need to tell you-” she started to say as she turned around, but Kamoi was breathing heavily and coming near her. While taking his jacket off he unfastened his tie, and strutted towards her. There was a strange look in his eyes. He was definitely a different person now.

“We can take a bath afterwards.”

“Huh?”

“You’re so cute, Mizuki.”

“Well, besides that I have to tell you-”

“You don’t have to be afraid.”

“No, that’s not-”

“Ahh, a high school girl’s uniformmm.”

“Now just wait a minute, first I have to tell-”

“Mizukii!!”

With almost enough energy to collide with her, Kamoi sprung and clung onto her. She about choked on his breath, which reeked of liquor. With the power of a tsunami, Kaname pinned him down with almost no resistance. An ordinary girl probably would have cried out. But unfortunately for him, Kaname was different. She had run through a barrage of bullets and shells flying all around her with Sousuke. Ruthless terrorists had pointed their gun at her. She had even gone one on one with that robust Sergeant John Danigan in a literal fight to the death.

Compared to that, this guy was a pushover.

“Really...!”

Without becoming confused or excited, with her right hand she grabbed the 20-thousand volt stun gun that she had placed in her bag to be able to take out quickly. She calmly removed the safety, and with the intent to be no crueler than this, she accurately

pressed the pins up against Kamoi's flank and jerkily pressed the trigger.

“-!!”

After he convulsed for a few moments, he stopped moving completely. His extremely heavy body was now pressing down on Kaname, who was lying on the bed face up.

With difficulty, she pushed her companion off of her. Then taking a deep breath, she muttered:

“I wonder who the victim was in this scenario...?”

After taking a few minutes to get her breath back, Kaname set into action. With a “pa-”, she opened up her overnight bag and groped through its contents. She pulled out two pairs of aluminum alloy handcuffs, tear gas spray, an ultra-strength flashlight, and another disposable stun gun. If you compared her to what you would call a standard female high school student, she was the heavy arms exception of all time.

These were weapons that Sousuke had forced on her a while back that she had never really looked over until now. The handcuffs were articles that she had confiscated from Sousuke. All of them were things that had been in the corner of a drawer covered in dust until today.

Putting the handcuffs between her teeth, and then grabbing the stupefied Kamoi's legs, she pulled him into the bathroom. She of course staggered many times due to the adult male's unexpected weight.

The bathroom was surprisingly magnificent. The Jacuzzi style bathtub was big enough to easily fit two people.

Ah... it's actually made for two people... she realized curiously, and then she looked at a metal fixture next to the bathtub. It looked as if it were made to hold a towel, but its positioning was unnatural. It probably had some use extremely unfathomable to her.

Oh, well. It looked sturdy enough.

She handcuffed Kamoi's leg to the fixture, checking its strength many times. That'll do. He definitely wouldn't be able to leave the bathroom. Even if he should start yelling for help, that's the kind of place this hotel was. The soundproofing was excellent.

Alright, next.

She violently shut the bathroom door, then looked around the wash bin. She grabbed the complimentary bathrobe and returned to the bed.

“Now then...”

Putting her hands on her hips, she carefully looked at the clothes she was wearing. They were the same winter clothes that she was used to. But her guess from earlier- since she couldn't deny the possibility of a transmitter, she had no choice but to separate herself from all of her things at once.

She quickly began to undress. Her white jacket and blue skirt. Her blouse and ribbon tie. Her shoes and wristwatch. She removed everything.

Now in her undergarments, she deliberated once again. Pulling the elastic in her panties, she gave up on the idea that something could be hidden in them. What about the bra? Could modern technology make a transmitter that could be hidden in the cup area?

The answer- unfortunately, yes.

She sighed, then took off her bra and placed it on the bed. She felt awkward for dismantling her bra in order to ascertain the presence of a transmitter. Now only in a pair of white panties, she turned around several times in front of the mirror. She wasn't leisurely checking out her naked body. After she had made sure there was nothing else on her, she slipped on the bathrobe. She wrapped it snugly around her torso and tied the belt tightly.

She chose her weapon. The taser. It was the type of disposable self-protection tool that you could only fire twice. Using a high-tension current, it could stun a person from up to five meters away. And one more, she couldn't forget about the handcuffs. There was no guarantee that these items didn't have a transmitter in them, but if you considered that they had been neglected in a desk until today, the likelihood was low.

"Alright now..."

And with a clap of her hands, she got on with it.

She turned off the lights in the room, then opened the rectangular door in the north wall. Just as she thought, there was a window behind it. Fumbling around, she opened the window and saw the wall of the next hotel within an arm's length. Because the window that she had her face out of was facing an alleyway far from the street, there were absolutely no people there.

The rain had gotten stronger. In the veil of darkness, the cold-water droplets blew through the confined alleyway.

She looked down and saw a wire fence separating the two hotels. Because this was the second floor, it looked as if she could reach the top of the fence with her foot.

Okay...

Putting her foot on the window frame, she leaned forward. She held the strap of the taser in her mouth. Clinging to the windowsill with both hands, she struggled to put one foot on top of the fence. The chest of the bathrobe opened up at once, and even though she knew no one was watching, she hurried up.

Her toe reached the fence. Now only a little further-

"...!"

Just as she was wondering if she could jump, her foot slipped because the fence was wet from the rain. She scraped her right arm against the fence as she fell on the concrete. Her right

side went numb from the impact and the pain, and she involuntarily cried out.

Without being able to breath for the pain, she lay crouched on the wet concrete for a short while as the rain poured down on her. The taser was lying right next to her. On the other side of a puddle was the bathrobe, which had easily come off.

In the middle of an alley of a love hotel. Alone. Bare-naked. And soaking wet.

It wasn't a fitting scene. Very uncool. She was miserable.

All of the sudden she thought what she was doing was pointless, and the tears started coming out of pain and self-pity.

No, I can't.

I'm being a coward again. Don't think it's stupid. Believe in yourself. Now, keep moving.

"Uh..."

Holding back the pain, she raised herself up. She had scrapes and cuts here and there on her skin, but luckily, no broken bones. Some bruises were about it.

Reeling in the belt of the bathrobe soaked in muddy water, she revised and firmly tied it back, then picked up the taser. She wanted to check it to make sure it still worked, but it would only fire twice before it stopped working.

Wobbling as she stood up, she started walking along in her bare feet.

She went around the outer wall of the hotel. She passed next to the backdoor entrance, and could hear the sounds of the television from the reception desk. Kaname climbed over the plants and shrubs, and moved to the back of the hotel street where no one would see her.

When she reached the back of a hotel almost three buildings down, there was an emergency staircase.

This is it...

Gripping the edges of the bathrobe tightly, Kaname looked up at those stairs. Rainwater dripped from the rough, rust-covered steel frame. This hotel, which she had scouted out earlier, was the tallest building in this vicinity.

First, she would check out the rooftop. From this rooftop, one commanded a view of the entire neighborhood and Main Street by looking down. More than that- it had the best likelihood that the person after her was hidden up there. It might be just an amateur's thinking, but it shouldn't be irrelevant.

She was breathing hard. Her toes and fingertips were extremely cold, but inside she was burning up.

Climbing over the iron bars attached to the gate, she carefully climbed up the emergency stairs.

She was almost to the sixth floor. The roof was close.

With her head just barely over the top of the steps, Kaname searched the roof's appearance. There were water supply and air conditioning units jumbled together in a labyrinth-type layout up there. There was no indication of anyone in the area she could see.

Kaname warily and stealthily moved onto the rooftop. Beside a compressor giving off a low rumbling noise, she continued along with her body so low to the ground she was almost crawling.

Hiding, she peeped at the area looking out over the main street. The streetlights made the silhouette of the rooftop edge dimly stand out. It was like a stream of light in the darkness. And on the edge of that stream-

...there?

She saw the figure of a man crouched down.

The man was on his knees on the edge of the rooftop with his back turned towards her and looking down over the main street.

He wasn't a large man. He was about the same height, or maybe a little taller than Kaname. He was wearing a light coat over his slightly stout frame, and there was a large attaché case at his feet.

There was some kind of electronic device in his hand. In this kind of rain, he didn't have an umbrella.

There was no mistake.

With her numb hands, she corrected her grip on the taser. She removed the safety- good. Taking one last deep breath, Kaname crept up on the man. Because of the sound of the rain and the fact that she was barefoot, she didn't make any noise.

He was still looking down over the main street as before. It didn't look as if he had noticed her.

Just five more meters.

Her heart was beating wildly in her chest, and she could feel the blood pumping somewhere around her throat.

Three more meters. She was close enough.

"Don't move!" Kaname shouted. The man's shoulders jumped in surprise, and he froze in that posture.

"I'm aiming a weapon on you. Put your hands in the air and turn around. Slowly," she said, remembering the phrase from the old movies she had seen, and her companion obeyed her orders. She could see his face. He was a middle-aged man about 40. He was wearing glasses and had a double chin, kind of like a businessman.

When he looked at her appearance- wearing a bathrobe, black hair disheveled and soaking wet, and pointing a taser closely at him- he let out a little groan.

"What the..."

His voice was a little high and hoarse.

"You have business with me, don't you? That's why I came here like this."

"...you noticed the transmitter, huh?" he said. He didn't have much of a facial expression, but she could see that he was trying hard to keep his composure.

"So you went to that kind of hotel with a man you'd never met before... it's seems you've made a fool of me."

"That's right. I'm sure you have a gun, right? Take it out slowly, and toss it at my feet."

"I'm with Mithril. I'm not going to attack you or anything."

"Hah, I wonder. I can't trust you," she said, her white breath showing in the air. Her body was involuntarily shaking due to the cold and fear. When he saw that, the man scoffed at her.

"Don't be so cocky. You think you've one-upped me with a taser? I can't kill you, but what about something to make sure you'll keep your big mouth shut? That would also be bad. For the past few days, someone other than me has been following you--"

"I said throw away the gun, you bastard!"

Just as she yelled this, a bullet hit the man in the chest. A small spray of water scattered from the impact on his wet shirt.

"...eh"

It wasn't the only one. There was a succession of bullets, over and over. His stout body shuddered each time. There was one to the head. A portion of his scalp was scraped and flew off. With an expressionless look of pain, the man who labeled himself as Mithril wobbled, then collapsed in a pool of water.

When she turned around, there next to the air conditioning unit about ten steps away from her stood another man.

He was wearing a simple jacket and jeans. He had a slender build, and his hair was cut close. She had never seen him before.

No, was he- the day before, was he the man she caught a glimpse of at the Sengawa shopping district?

"Found you," he said, pointing his automatic pistol at her.
"Nihao, little missy. And goodbye."

"Wai-"

And without any hesitation at all, the man fired.

That was her really good fortune. It could have been because of the abrupt surprise, or maybe because her body was numb from the cold, but- both of her knees fell out from under her. The bullet barely skimmed across her lightly shaking cheek.

"...ah"

Both Kaname and the man gave a look of surprise.

The sliding part on the man's gun slid back and stopped. Kaname remembered that this should mean that he was out of bullets. She had learned this from watching Sousuke draw a gun many times.

The assassin calmed down, and slowly began to switch out the magazine. He wasn't going to become disorganized by any means. That was certainly clear.

"There's no place to run."

That's right. She was standing on the edge of a rooftop. The air conditioning and water supply units were obstacles, and the only escape route was the emergency staircase behind the man. There was nowhere to run. Not at all. This sudden attack was absurd. And unshakeable despair grabbed a hold of her heart.

What's going to happen now? She didn't know.

Who is this guy? She didn't know.

Why did he have to kill her? She didn't know.

Was this her fate...?

Fate.

The moment this word crossed her mind, an indescribable anger flooded her body.

Her legs, which were frozen in fear, reacted as if she had been hit with a whip. Without really thinking, Kaname made a mad dash to the right.

Fight it. No matter what. Don't let those things trifle with you. Give 'em hell till the end. Never give yourself up.

Would he be proud of her like this-?

"It's useless."

He aimed at her again and shot. The bullet skimmed past Kaname's black hair. The edge of the roof was getting closer. She didn't even try to stop; she sped up instead. Kicking off of the concrete, and using the elevated edge as a platform- Kaname jumped off into the sky.

"-!!"

The alleyway spread out underneath her legs. She cleared the deep, deep chasm and landed on the neighboring building, which was almost two stories shorter.

There was a cheap storage room made of tin on the roof of the next building. Kaname fell on top of it, breaking through the tin roof, and landed on top of the garbage piled up inside. The noise was terrible. Plastic and pieces of wood danced all around her. The impact made her black out for a second, as well as knock the breath out of her, and she cried out voicelessly. Scratches, cuts, bruises, sprains- Kaname's face twisted in pain as it swept all over her body.

"Uh..."

I'm alive. And I can move. That means the game's not over yet.

She tried to get up- and slipped. She tried again. She stood up somehow. The bathrobe was barely hanging on to her shoulders

now. She didn't know where the belt for it was. Even so, she had held on firmly to the taser in her right hand.

She kicked the wooden door, which opened more easily than she thought it would. She rolled out of the storage room, and looked up at the rooftop that she jumped from just seconds ago. She could see the man's silhouette. He was pointing his gun in her direction.

"!"

She quickly ran. She heard the muffled sound of a gun shooting from above her head. The bullet hit at her feet, and a large sheet of water rose up from the wet roof.

The stairs...!

Kaname hurried to the stairway entrance. This building didn't have an external emergency staircase; instead you went into the building through the door in the short tower on one corner of the roof. That was the only way out. She didn't find any other places where she could jump off or jump to another building.

Out of breath, she rushed over to the iron door and grabbed the knob. Putting all her effort into it, she tried to open the door—but it wouldn't open.

She needed a key!

She tried pushing and pulling, but it was no use. The door would only shake with a "gatsun!" sound and remain firmly locked. No matter how she hit it or kicked it, cried or yelled at it, the door remained shut—

"No—"

Her only way to escape wouldn't open.

Clinging to the door, she looked up again at the other rooftop. In the dim glow of the neon lights, she saw the slender body of the assassin casually jump down to the building she was on.

If he had the refined skills of an assassin, it wouldn't be a problem for him to jump down from that height. Much less one that an ordinary girl could fall and still be alright- some remarkable ability.

He landed like a large bird swooping down over the water's surface. There was an appropriate silence from the man by the name of "Feihung" [Flying Bird].

He silently stood up and started walking.

He couldn't see her figure from here. But even if there were places for her to hide, there weren't any places for her to run. There was no need to panic. He would just manage his job with the same reliability as ever. It was just like cornering a chicken and cutting off its head.

After he shot her to death, he would disgrace the body, take a picture and send it to Hong Kong. That was what that person wanted. There was no dispute.

Nevertheless, he had been surprised by the girl's resistance. Without begging for her life or giving up, even though both would be useless, she kept on running away. To him, that was just as distasteful.

He reached the entrance to the stairwell.

On top of the roof, besides the broken storage room, water and air conditioning units, there was a storehouse with small potted plants and gardening tools. It was a little squalid and obstructed his field of vision. It was also darkened because of the night rain.

Of course he was prepared. He also didn't feel like listening to her beg for her life. Next time, he would give that girl a quick death, since those were the orders he had received.

"..."

He soon realized where the girl was hiding. On the other side of the air conditioning unit were some large flowerpots that

had been left out and stacked up. In between- in a gap that you would miss if you weren't careful, he saw someone crouching down. It was a figure in a bathrobe covered in mud. It was huddled up like a trapped hare.

It seemed she thought he'd pass her by like that.

He moved in closer, aimed at his target and fired without mercy.

The flower pots that he shot up with his .45 cracked into pieces and fell down. The bathrobe jumped around in the darkness as each bullet hit it. Without making a sound, the girl convulsed and collapsed towards him.

No-

"...?"

It wasn't the girl.

The thing that had fallen over in the faint light was a piece of a flowerpot wrapped up in the bathrobe.

Then where was the girl-

From the top of a nearby water storage tank, Kaname looked down at the back of the man's head.

She was wearing only a pair of panties, and her drenched hair clung to her completely chilled body. Her face was as pale as death. She was down on her knees, and even in this situation, she was firmly covering up her chest area with her left arm, while aiming the taser with her free right hand.

She was about two meters away. That was close enough.

She was scared to pull the trigger. She felt like she would go crazy from the tension and the terror. Even though he might notice her at any moment, countless doubts weakened her finger.

Would she be able to hit him perfectly? Was this kind of weapon- this kind of self-protection tool recent? Had he really not noticed that he had fallen into her trap? What if he was only

pretending to have fallen for it? Could an amateur such as herself beat such a man in the first place? Would there really be such a nice story? Wouldn't it be smarter to plead for her life? Shouldn't she say something like "Put your hands up"?



Just then, those words that she had heard once came to her mind.

"Licking your lips in front of prey - Only third rate amateurs would do that!"

The one who had said those words wasn't here right now. But that memory, those words, gave her some final power.

She pulled the trigger.

Bang! The dry sound crackled through the air. From the explosive power of the gunpowder cartridge, a spike-shaped pin flew out, sticking into the man's shoulder. Instantly, the gun shot out several thousand volts of electricity running along the wire, causing the man's body to convulse violently. White smoke and electricity gushed out of the place where the pin was stuck.

"...!"

After the several-second electrical discharge, the man dropped to his knees- but he didn't fall over. He had endured it.

She shot again.

This time the pin stuck in his back. She shocked him again just to make sure. The man let out a groan, dropped his gun and fell over.

He didn't move after that.

I did it, she thought. All at once she started breathing wildly and her whole body started sweating all over.

"Haa... haa..."

She dropped the now-discharged taser, and jumped down from the water supply tank. She cautiously walked towards the man, picking up the gun he had dropped and the bathrobe. The life-saving bathrobe was full of holes and in terrible condition, but she put it back on in relief.

The man looked to be completely unconscious.

It was only natural, when she thought about it calmly. He had been shot twice by a taser. Even if he were a professional assassin, it didn't change the fact that he was still a flesh and blood human being.

She beat him. With her own strength.

She didn't feel elated, though. She stood there, half in doubt, the rain pouring down on her.

Just then, she heard a new voice.

"Well, it seems you won- somehow."

Kaname looked around, and on the other side of the air conditioning unit in an area vaguely lit up by the neon lights, she saw three figures.

"..."

The one in the middle was a small, young man holding an umbrella.

No- when she looked closely, he wasn't exactly small. Because the two men to either side of him were eccentrically large, he just seemed that way. The two large men were both wearing dark green coats, with the hoods drawn so low over their eyes that she couldn't see their faces. The man on the right was easily carrying the corpse of the Mithril agent who had just been shot on his shoulders.

"You see-" the young man said in a refined voice, "-I believe that there are two types of girls in the world. Those who are like the rain, and those who aren't. You are without a doubt the former. I think if you could see yourself now, you might say 'Who's that?'"

"...is that sarcasm?" Kaname said listlessly, and she casually lowered the gun she held in her right hand. A cold wind blew past, whipping around her torn-up bathrobe and drenched black hair.

"I'm sorry, I meant that as the highest compliment."

"I see. And you are...?" she asked, and the young man took a few steps forward.

He was taller than she had thought. Maybe about the same height as Sousuke. For some reason, his demeanor made her feel as light as air. He wore black pants under a long black coat, a black vest and white shirt. With his calm brilliance, he appeared to be a high-class item.

"I am one of your kind," he said as he closed his umbrella. His features became apparent.

He wasn't Japanese. He had smooth, white skin, and bluish-gray eyes. Also- flowing silver-colored hair. If Kaname had been in a different situation, he might have stolen her heart a little with his noble looks.

His looks were vaguely gentle. Whether he was an enemy or ally, dangerous or not, his ambience made it to where she absolutely couldn't tell one way or another.

"I came to rescue you... is what I would like to say, but the truth is that I did not. You were fine whether I helped you or not. The results probably would have been the same in any case. I haven't gotten down to the real business yet, but with regards to my motives concerning you, I came to make a proposition- that kind of thing."

"Proposition?"

"Fate or paradoxical karma. Or you could also call it a dilemma."

"This is tiring talk. Why don't you just come out and say it?"

"I'm not so sure about saying too many things directly, since language is such a transient vehicle. But perhaps that's your

charm," he said, and with eyes that looked as if he were enjoying an old tune, the young man smiled.

"..."

Kaname felt as if she had met him before. Maybe when she was in New York? No, that wasn't it. None of her friends in New York had been a knockout with ash blonde hair like this. Only in movies and photographs had she seen such a uniquely polished, ash-blonde-

All at once it came to her.

"Don't tell me, you're Tessa's...?"

Without answering, the young man walked past Kaname and looked down at the assassin still lying in a puddle of water.

"Get up, Feihung. You've woken up already, haven't you?"

The man stirred and lifted up his face, mumbling.

"...Mr. Silver. You were watching?"

"I didn't come for the full story, though. The girl is no match for you. Give up."

"I refuse."

"I will speak up concerning the disregard for our organization's ideals. I want you to persuade your older brother on the rampage in Hong Kong."

"You think I'll obey? Or that my brother will listen to me?"

"Revenge is a useless thing."

"It's not revenge. It's what 'he' wants. He found us. As long as I'm alive, I will try to kill that girl."

"I see..." the young man said in an insincere voice.

"Well then, this is goodbye, Feihung."

"You're the one who's gonna die, Leonard Testarossa!" and in the next instant, the assassin jumped up into the air.

Both of his arms moved in a flash. Silver lights pierced the air, rushing towards the young man. At the same time right in front

of Kaname's eyes, the young man casually flipped out his coat- though he himself didn't really move at all. But the beams of light dashing at him- four assorted throwing knives- were stopped, or perhaps even repelled, by his coat, which moved like a living thing.

It wasn't just bulletproof clothing. The scene looked as if black wings were moving on their own to protect the young man.

"...!"

The assassin made a rush like he was gliding over the surface of the earth. He took out another switch knife, and holding it in a backhand grip, he charged headlong at him.

"It's useless."

The giant green man cut in front of the young man. Up until then he had just been standing there silently, but in an instant he moved in like a squall. He stopped the assassin's charge straight on with his body, the knife piercing right in the middle of his chest. But the large man, without even noticing, grabbed the throat of the assassin with an arm as big as a log.

"...gah!"

With just one arm, the large man lifted the struggling assassin up in the air. He had tremendous superhuman strength.

<Your instructions>

He said in a mechanical voice.

"Reaction A1. Make certain, okay?"

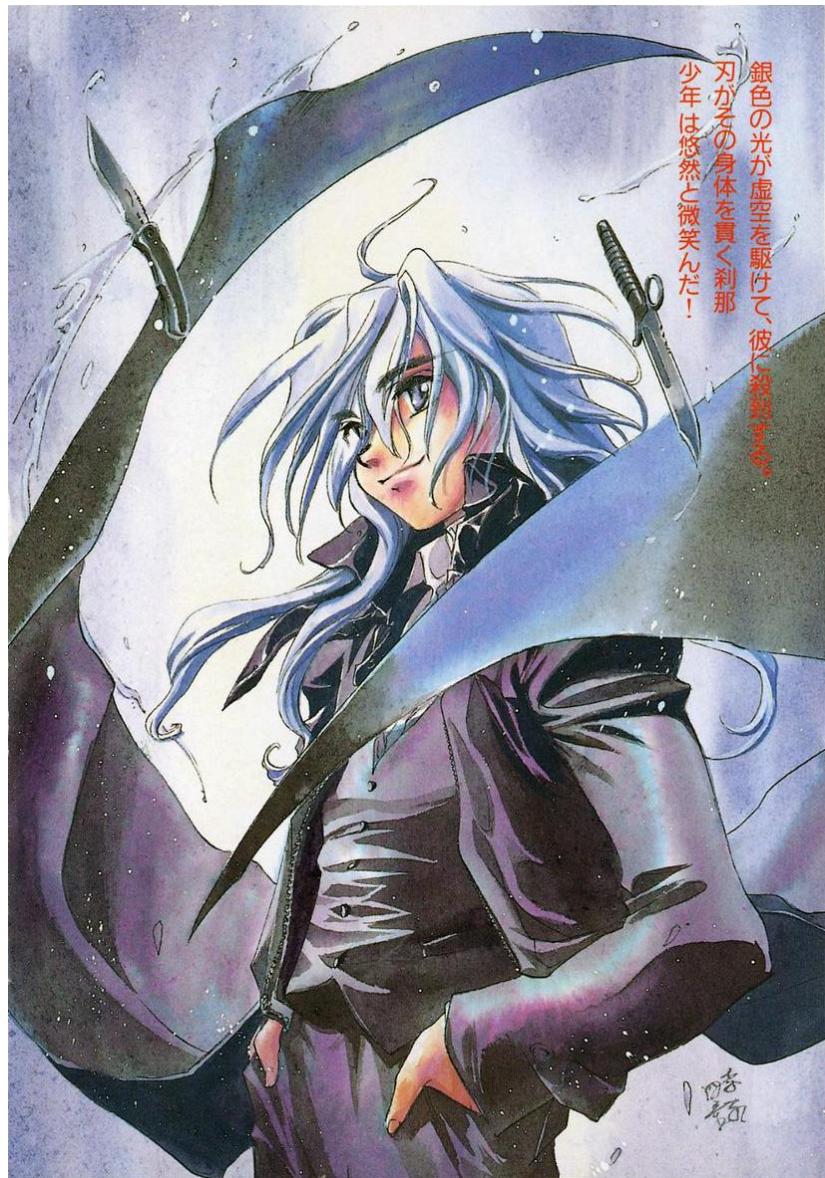
<Roger>

Crack! was the horrible sound. His neck was broken.

The large man furthermore thrust his open left arm into the limp assassin's chest.

Bang! was the sound of a heavy gunshot. A large spray of blood gushed from the assassin's back, and there was a huge, gaping hole in his chest cavity. Because his spinal cord and

shoulder blade were shattered, his arms dangled down at unnatural angles.



A silver light runs through the empty sky, pouring over him. The moment that the blade pierces through that body, the boy calmly smiles.

<Reaction A1 complete. Designated threat completely silenced>

The large man reported, dropping the tragic corpse to the ground.

"Good work. Wait for orders."

<Roger>

The large man flapped his coat and passed by Kaname. Whenever his arms or legs moved, the joints made a low creaking noise.

Kaname was able to catch a glimpse underneath his hood.

There was an unpolished black mask. In the eye area, there were only long, narrow slits like ski goggles.

He's not... human?

Kaname, who had helplessly watched the sad slaughter, realized somewhere in the corner of her numb head.

"Plan 1211 Alastor. The world's smallest AS. It might be more appropriate to call it a robot by now, though. I think you understand by now, but having ASes act autonomously is rather difficult. There are also many problems with the miniaturization of the power source and control system," the young man- Leonard, explained without reason. But to the limit of Kaname's knowledge, these "problems" that he said were involved with technical difficulties that almost couldn't be tidied up.

"...well, just now was what I meant by my real business. I made you watch something terrible just now. I'm sorry."

"I... I don't understand what's going on, but-"

"But?"

"You shouldn't... kill anything..." she said, her voice shaking. Leonard stared at her in complete wonder.

"But he just tried to kill the both of us, didn't he?"

"Yes, but still..."

"Besides that, I haven't killed as many people as your boyfriend has."

"!"

With just that, she understood he was talking about Sousuke. Instead of asking "Why him?" Kaname started protesting, almost reminiscently.

"Him...! He's... had to fight ever since he was little. He didn't... have a choice. Since his enemies were all bad guys... so he could save other people, people weaker than him. And he definitely doesn't enjoy it. No, actually, it really bothers him. So... anyway, he's... umm... this is different. He wouldn't... do something like this..."

Leonard listened with deepening interest as Kaname fumbled her words. After that he smiled mischievously, looking into her eyes.

"You don't seriously believe that line of reasoning, do you?"

"But..."

She looked away in spite of herself.

"The act itself is essentially the same, either way. But you only blame me. You're very supportive of him, aren't you?"

"No, I..."

"You love him."

"No, I don't."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Look at me."

"Eh-"

He took her completely by surprise. Embracing her shoulders tenderly, she suddenly faced him and in that instant- his lips pressed up against hers.



It was a cold, soft, and wet sensation.

It was so abrupt that her mind went blank. Where she was, who he was, even who she was- she forgot everything. She didn't even feel hatred. No, on the contrary- for just a moment, a sweet flavor even tried to overcome her heart.

Time went by.

Leonard didn't resist Kaname's slap. She slapped him hard across the side of the face, but he just staggered lightly. They probably considered that as aggressive behavior, because the two large men- no, robots- next to him quickly adopted a ready posture, bending down a little.

"It's okay. Wait for orders."

The two Alastors straightened back up.

Kaname touched her lips and leaned back up against the water supply tank, glaring at Leonard. She wanted to cry, but she definitely wasn't going to cry in front of him.

"What was that...?"

"A kiss to wake you up. Because I like you," he innocently laughed, stroking his cheek.

"I hate you. I loathe you."

"That's what I like about you. You, with your fleeting ferocity, vulgar sophistication, and elusiveness, just like water."

"Shut up!!" Kaname yelled, and he shrugged his shoulders as if to say "ooh, scary". He ordered something to the robots. One of them walked to the exit on the rooftop, the locked iron door, and with all his might, forced it open.

"I think we should move along while you're not trying to kill me."

The other robot, who was carrying the man from Mithril, laid the corpse down on the concrete. No- it wasn't a corpse. The man stirred a little bit, groaning in indiscernible words.

"That's right, he's alive," Leonard said. "This person is also involved with those who label me an 'enemy'- I wonder what I should do? You wouldn't mind if I eliminated him, would you?"

The inner part of the robot's left arm flashed, and he pointed a black gun muzzle at the man. Ch-chin, came a thick sound. It was a large mouth machine gun like the one that finished off the assassin.

"Wa-wait a minute!?"

"Why?"

"I... I had business with him from the start. Please don't kill him!"

"Hmm... but this person was extremely rude to you earlier. I thought you would violently protest something like taking his like to make up for it."

"That's for me to decide," Kaname said in a restrained voice. "I... I'll forgive you for what you did to me, so please, stop the killing."

"I'm surprised. For the sake of a guy like this? I didn't think you were this soft."

"Don't make me say it again. That's for me to decide!" she protested, and for a moment, Leonard was dumbstruck.

"You've surprised me again," he chuckled.

"I know. Now, you'll leave him here and leave, right?"

The robot withdrew his gun.

The other robot easily picked up the corpse of the assassin. Accompanying the two robots who had finished their work, Leonard walked in the direction opposite of the exit towards the edge of the rooftop. If he took one step forward, he would fall headlong four stories in the middle of an alleyway... but before he reached that point, he stopped and looked back.

"A few things before I say goodbye... I meant it when I said I liked you. I wasn't just teasing. I want you to believe that."

"..."

"Miss Kaname Chidori. You are still asleep. You will probably be able to see a new world finally come about, and those like you may be essential."

"Huh? What do you me-"

"Until we meet again," he said, and then jumping at the same time as the two robots, he disappeared from sight.

There was the sound of splitting asphalt. Kaname ran over and looked down in the alley. The dim alleyway was covered only in gray fog and nothing else.

She walked back to the Mithril man, who was lying in a pool of water. The man vacantly looked up at Kaname. The right side of his full face was completely ripped. The shape of his head, which was kind of like the anime character 'Anpan-man', had not changed, but there wasn't one drop of blood.

The ripped part wasn't flesh, but urethane foam. The face of the middle-aged man was actually a successful mask. His real face showed through the tear in the urethane.

She jerked the mask off.

The face of a young man with slit eyes appeared. No... was it a woman? She couldn't tell. He had the slender features of both, and didn't look to be older than 20. His appearance was haggard, and his complexion was terribly pale. She had a feeling that she had seen his face many times around her neighborhood- but the memory was vague, and she couldn't be sure.

"It's... a disguise."

"Yeah... it is," he said in his real voice. There was a cold feeling in it.

The places where the bullets had entered the chest and stomach fat that he was wearing weren't bleeding, since there was probably a bulletproof vest inside. But there was a little bit of blood where he was shot in the shoulder and thigh, leaking out and mixing with the rain.

"Can you move? Where are you hurt?"

"I don't know... that guy just now... he gave me... a shot of something..."

"Do you need any help?"

"No thanks..." he said in a pained voice, "I... still have my pride. This blunder... this mess... I would have been... better off dead..."

"I see," she said, and turning her back to the Mithril operative, she took a deep breath.

Too much had happened in less than ten minutes. All sorts of feelings and emotions jumbled together and burst in her mind.

Surprise, relief, doubts, humiliation, anger, anxiety.

And above all things, the unpleasant feeling of that kiss that no matter how many times she wiped away would not disappear. Even though it only lasted a moment, she felt wretched for how she forgot to resist and gave herself over to him.

It was a fast kiss. Strictly speaking, there was a time in kindergarten when she had a joke kiss with one of the other girls in her class, but excluding that, this was her first kiss. People these days may have laughed at her, but she had decided that she wouldn't do it unless it was someone she really liked. For example-no, in any case, it had to be someone she liked. That was very important to her.

But now, and in such a way-

"...!!"

She hit the water supply tank. Gon! it reverberated. She was either crying from the pain in her fist and all over her body, or persuading herself out of desperation.

"Uu... kuh..."

All of the emotions that had collected since she had gone to the staff room snapped, and she started heaving violently. The strength that hadn't even wavered when an assassin was pursuing her had been crushed with just one kiss.

He was gone, and had she really not felt anything at all? Was she really as cold as ice?

It wasn't that... was it?

"Sousuke..."

Why aren't you here? Is it your fault? I ended up like this because you weren't here. What would you do? You would hate this, wouldn't you? I hate it. Come back to me. Somehow. Say "it's not a problem".

She cried, but no sound came out. It wasn't as if an answer would come. No matter how she sobbed in this place all alone, nothing would change.

If only she could press reset. Rewind back to at least when she gave him the haircut.

She had known the truth. In front of that cute sleepy face, the sweet emotion and natural impulse that she felt. This was her punishment for disguising those. Even though that had been her last chance. If only she had said "Hey, let's kiss" in a sweet voice. But instead, she ran away. With a splash of water, she had run away.

Also, it hadn't been more than just a little touch, but even then it was important. And she had lost that one thing forever. After he left.

That's how I always am...

Even though she had someone all along, she had never tried to admit it to herself.

'He might betray me. He isn't dependable. He'll only hurt me.'

'Like my mom.'

That's why she didn't rely on him. That's why she didn't get close. That's why- she didn't admit her true feelings to herself.

And only when she had lost everything did she realize it. What she could have done. What she just didn't have the courage to do.

"Sousuke..."

It was the same way this time, as well, wasn't it? It had all ended without her being able to act, right?

She wondered to herself again.

Is this really it?

She stood sobbing in the rain, shoulders shaking, for no telling how long.

She stopped crying and lifted up her face.

Turning around, she walked back to where the Mithril operative was lying.

"Earlier you said you'd have been better off dead, didn't you?"

"..."

"What if I gave you a little more trouble? I'll do it. From now on. Forever."

Translator's Notes:

1. Manga is Japanese comics (you know that by now, right?)
2. 'Go' is a traditional Japanese board game.
3. Famous meeting spot in Tokyo (a statue of a dog).

Chapter 5: His Problem

October 23rd, 11:38 (Eastern China Standard Time)
Hong Kong, Hong Kong Island Special Region
("People's Liberation Committee" Side), Mid-Level

Ten minutes passed as they continued through the spacious reception room. The master of this room- a member of Mithril's Intelligence Department stationed in Hong Kong- had not come yet.

The ceiling was high, and there were large windows. Abundant natural light brightened up the room. This place was built on the steep slope of Mt. Victoria with a view of the ocean, the aboveground 30th floor of a tall mansion.

There were a countless number of structures on this steep slope- and from this building, which was the tallest high-rise apartment building out of all of them, one commanded a panoramic view of the city of Hong Kong below.

Big and small, old and new, the buildings were closely crammed together. They had heard about it, but the density of those high-rise apartments wasn't normal.

Confusion. Disorder. Chaos. The scenery could only be described as such.

"When you look at it like this, it doesn't look like it's changed that much, really," mumbled Mao, who was standing next to Souseki.

"You've been here before?"

"Many times before the restoration, yeah. Relatives on my mother's side lived not too far from here. But they moved to New York and aren't here anymore. Before I joined Mithril, I stayed here for about two months. Just hanging out, pretty much."

“Hanging out, huh?”

“After I was kicked out of the Marines. I didn’t have the willpower to work, and I didn’t want to go back to my parents’ house in New York, since my old man would rag on me. Damn Air Force jerk...” she said, clicking her tongue.

Because Sousuke hadn’t heard much about Mao’s personal history before, he was a little surprised to hear talk about the old days.

“Your father was in the military?”

“Yup. A dumb bomber pilot. He’s retired now, and works at a company. He acts all-important in spite of the fact that he’s a stingy coward. He’s also a conspiracy-monger.”

“Conspiracy...?”

“Yeah. When I tried to do serious work after high school, he went around behind my back and tried to marry me to some Harvard pretty boy. I was disgusted by it, of course. So I went and joined the Marines on the day of the wedding to get back at him.”

She had probably gotten great pleasure from doing that.

She lowered her head with a wide grin on her face.

“I snuck out of the church by myself, and went to the recruitment office four blocks away, still in my wedding dress. The corporal on duty there, his eyes were thiiis wide. ‘Are you serious?’ he said, and I said ‘Of course.’ Everyone in the office tried to talk me out of it. ‘Miss bride, you should rethink this. Surely your parents will be upset,’ they said, and I told them ‘My dad is in the Air Force.’ When I said that, everyone said ‘Oh, if that’s the case, okay then. Sign these papers first.’”

Yang, who had overheard the story from a little way off, couldn’t contain himself and burst out laughing.

“What do you think of a girl like that?”

“She’s the best... heh heh. No, she’s too cool,” he said. Yang’s shoulders were shaking in laughter and there were tears in the corner of his eyes as he gave the thumbs up.

The atmosphere was strange. There was the tension before an operation mixed with a funny story to kill time. There was the silence of the room and Yang trying to suppress his laughter. The light from the window created the shadows of Mao and Yang clearly. In that scene, however, there was a strange melancholy looming about in the air.

Mao sentimentally gazed off into the deep sky.

“The best, huh...? It’s true, that was the best time. I had just made a decision, and I felt like the world had spread out infinitely before me. I said ‘No matter what it is, I can do it, and no matter where it is, I can go.’”

“No matter where...?” Sousuke said as if he were hearing these words for the first time, but Mao just shrugged.

“That’s right. Of course a lot of stuff happened after that, setbacks and disappointment. But I think that being that way was really great. I liked myself more than I ever had before. That was how it was.”

Sousuke didn’t really understand what Mao meant by that. He didn’t grasp why she would suddenly tell this kind of story at a time like this.

“Well, it was just something that coming back here made me remember. Don’t think about it too much.”

“Mm... okay,” Sousuke answered, albeit a little confused.

Then the door of the reception office opened, and a middle-aged, plump, white man entered the room.

“Wow, I’m so sorry to make you wait this long.”

He quickly wiped the sweat from his temple with a handkerchief and walked up to them. He had very friendly eyes,

his black hair was slicked back with pomade, and he wore a mustache. He looked to be around 50 years old, but he could have been much younger.

This man is...?

Sousuke and Mao both looked at each other.

He was a member of the Department of Intelligence, Gavin Hunter.

They had imagined a stoic old war veteran from that name, but the person who had come in was a profusely sweating fat man. They were rather surprised by this.

On the outside, Hunter appeared to be an influential trade merchant, as he was proficient in both Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese. He had a lot of pull with both the North and South armies, and seemed to go out to eat every night with their leaders.

It was a different image from what you would call a “spy”, but it wasn’t necessary to go out on big adventures like James Bond in order to collect information. The casual remarks of the army’s leaders, the small articles in newspapers’ financial columns, as well as unfamiliar ships coming into port- one could guess a lot from just those things alone. Besides, that was essentially the job of the Intelligence Department, anyway.

“This is probably obvious already, but both the North and South Armies have become extremely nervous,” Hunter explained. “You’ve only had a brief look at it, but the situation is very serious. Together, both of the armies have had three incidents of friendly fire, and four incidents of firing at civilians. It’s a miracle that the North and South armies haven’t declared war on each other yet. However, that is only a matter of time.”

“And if it does happen?”

“Then Victoria Bay will be in the middle of a terrible shootout. They can get at all sorts of weapons besides guns. Rifles,

machine guns, trench mortar guns, rockets, anti-tank missiles... it could become scary. A sea of fire in a split second. Just like the row of houses that you see.”

Since they divided, the North China Army and South China Army had confronted each other with Victoria Bay in between. It hadn’t progressed into battle because of the intentions of both armies, neither of which wanted Hong Kong to become a lake of fire. However, those intentions were now starting to wane due to the terrorism of the AS.

“What about the citizens?”

“They started throwing accusations a long time ago. The other side blames the inland people of Sangaai. Our side blames South Hong Kong and Lantao... well, it is the center of women and children. I also sent my wife to our vacation house in Lantao. Relations between the North and the South have mostly stopped due to the strict guard conditions of both. The ports have been closed, and most of the flights to the Kai Tak and Chek Lap Kok airports have been cancelled. We can only cover our eyes as stock prices and exchange rates plummet. Geez... and after we were really starting to make progress since they divided up, too. It really will become another Berlin at this rate.”

“But it was becoming like that anyway, right?” Mao unexpectedly muttered, and both Hunter’s superiority complex and eyebrow rose in response.

“That’s Chinese people for you. They’re cunning, full of vitality, and so commercially driven it’s surprising. They freely manipulate their official stances and real intentions, as well as the positives and the negatives.”

“Ahh.”

“Just try some Chinese cuisine, then you will understand these people and just how much culture they have. The ideology

that westerners have concocted in just 100 years is really quite insignificant in comparison. The drama over the division was both a danger and an opportunity for those of us in business. Some were ruined, and some became rich. That's how it always is. Even if it is politically divided and there are two military forces present, it was relatively easy to come and go as one chose up until the day before yesterday. In short it was mutual back-scratching.”

The triumphant tone in Hunter's voice made it seem as if he felt he were of pure Hong Kong descent, even though he was the only white person in the room.

“Well, what about the problem AS?”

“As of right now, its whereabouts are where we absolutely cannot catch it. Its last appearance was three hours ago, in Shau Kei Wan on the Hong Kong Island side. They reported serious damage to two ASes as well as an armored vehicle. There were four casualties in the North China Army, as well as eight civilians wounded... such a terrible thing.”

“And there's no doubt that it's hidden somewhere in the city?”

“I can't confirm that, but our analysts and I both think so. And my long years also tell me so. Though it would trouble that particular area...”

Hunter spread out a map, and began the technical explanation. It was the opinion of a not-so-detailed pro, who had thoroughly and exhaustively scrutinized all sorts of information. And from every word he spoke, Mao and the others could tell how deeply he cared about Hong Kong.

Mao and Sousuke, who were both very knowledgeable about the methods for continuous use of the invisible type ECS, offered advice as well as narrowed the scope of Hunter's analysis. It was a profitable discussion. Mao's group as well as Hunter's

group were all practical people. The discord of the intelligence bureaus in the upper departments had no effect here.

“Anything else? Areas or conditions that we can exclude?” Hunter asked, typing on the keyboard of the AI’s computer terminal.

“Mark out places where there are a lot of dogs or crows.”

“Hmm. Why birds and dogs and such?”

“Because it’s presumed that birds can see the AS, probably because the ECS can’t conceal in the ultra-violet spectrum. Crows especially will make a lot of noise and fly about, and other various annoyances. Dogs, too. They’re sensitive to the smell of the ECS’s ozone.”

“Ha haa... I guess so. Anything else?” Mao looked at Sousuke’s profile.

“I think that’s about it... Sousuke?”

“Hm?” Sousuke said, looking as if he had just pulled out of his own thoughts.

“There’s nothing else, is there?”

“N... no. Not really.”

To Mao, it seemed as though Sousuke had been having problems concentrating, which was rather unusual. Ever since they had left the *Tuatha de Danaan*.

Just then, Hunter, who was staring at the computer terminal screen, said in a voice of admiration, “Amazing. There are 49 places on the Hong Kong side, and 78 places on the Kowloon side. With this, we can divide our forces up and cover them in a half-a-day.”

“If the conditions are right... however. If we do find it, let’s find its weakness and nail it.”

Without delay, Hunter's subordinates and Mao's group decided on who would scout out the hiding place of the enemy AS. There was no time to lose.

They decided that Mao's group from the Operations Department would split into three teams to help with reconnaissance.

Sousuke and Mao would cross over Victoria Harbor and go over into the Kowloon peninsula.

Yang and Wu would look around Hong Kong Island.

The third team was the transport helicopter that brought them. They would activate the ECS Invisibility function and search all of Hong Kong from the skies using the ECCS (the anti-ECS sensors). Because the ECCS would be of little use in urban areas, they would be in charge of mainly the suburbs and the various-sized islands.

The two light vans that they borrowed from Hunter had [獵人清潔有限公司] written in large blue letters on the side. Hunter's cleaning company. That was all it meant, but to Sousuke, who was not familiar with Chinese, it was a very strange representation.

“It looks like that old man's business is pretty extensive...” Mao said as she folded her arms in the underground parking lot of the building. The four of them had already changed into the uniforms of the cleaning company, but they suited Sousuke the least.

“Do you have your permits? Check your operating permits, as well. Go ahead and put your fake passports and credit cards in another pocket. Only one weapon a piece, and don't fire it. Communicate at all times. Be careful since it's martial law around here.”

“What if it looks like we’re going to be held up by cars or police for inspection? There are a lot of units where Hunter doesn’t have any influence, right?” Yang asked.

“That’s why you have to be careful. If you have to run, then run. But don’t open fire. Attacking innocent bystanders in cars is out of the question. We’ll plan the rest out later. If you’re caught, you’ll probably be interrogated until Hunter can pull some strings. Even if you’re tortured, don’t say anything. That’s all.”

“That’s pretty tough...”

“Also, be thinking about what to do when the enemy is located, since we don’t have consent to kill him without contact or approval. Got it?”

“Roger.”

“Then let’s go.”

The four then took the cleaning company’s vans and left the parking lot.

The two groups separated, heading into town.

Yang’s group’s vehicle headed in the direction of Victoria Peak.

Sousuke drove their van down a steep road surrounded by rows of trees for a few minutes, and left the heart of Central. Rows of skyscrapers seemed to jut into the sky on both sides of Des Voeux Road, and it felt like they were passing into a manmade valley. For Sousuke, who grew up in the country, the majesty of this scene was quite overwhelming.

The cloudy sky was extremely confined.

Central would probably be a business area comparable to Shinjuku or Marunouchi in Tokyo, but there were very few people about. Traffic was sparse, too. There was almost no one other than the drivers on the double-decker trams that ran through the middle

of the road. The sound of the rail scraping against metal rang pointlessly throughout the area.

“Surprising, isn’t it... I’ve never seen Central like this before,” Mao said, looking over the quiet urban streets from the passenger seat.

When they came to a wide five-lane road, they were able to see the armored vehicles and ASes of the North China Army. They were olive colored Rk-92 Savages. They were the same type supplied by the North Koreans, with their specifications geared towards exportation.

Heading east along the street, they passed through Wanchai going towards Causeway Bay.

The valley of buildings continued on. The number of famous Hong Kong “zhaopai” [signboards] grew. Flashy signs in colors like red and green protruded from the buildings, thoroughly covering the sky above the road.

[雅胎美容護膚中心]

[展藝設計裝飾公司]

[福村東苑菜館]

[華爾登影音器材有限公司]

[新華中西藥行]

[富搖海鮮酒家]

[佛如來素會]

[釣藝琴行文化藝術中心]

To Sousuke, who wasn’t very good at kanji, they were nothing but nonsensical Japanese readings^{*1}. Of course there were illuminated signs, and one could even see a large number of the new hologram signboards.

They were civilian products that used a basic form of the ECS. They reached the entrance of an underground tunnel. Going

through this tunnel would take them towards the Kowloon Peninsula, which was controlled by the South China Army.

The entrance of the tunnel was on high alert. There were four Savages, two armored vehicles, and more than 60 heavily-armed foot soldiers. There were sandbags piled up all over the place, along with barbed wire fence and turrets established around the perimeter.

There was a clearance gate shortly before the tunnel. Civilian vehicles were lined up in front of it, with soldiers arguing with the people inside the cars. In the end, and without approval, the civilians would make a U-turn and head back.

The arrangement was that Hunter was supposed to call the leaders of this garrison.

“Now, let’s see if they will kindly let us through...”

“If Hunter’s connections are certain.”

A soldier with an AKM rifle over his shoulder spread his arms out in front of the gate and told them “Stop” in Cantonese. He walked over to the driver’s side, and quickly spouted something over the window. Since he had only memorized a few everyday phrases on the helicopter ride over, Sousuke didn’t understand anything of what the man said.

“Mao, would you help?”

“Ming baak laa. Hoi cheung.”²

“?”

“He said ‘Understand? Open the window.’”

“...”

Sousuke obeyed, opening the van’s power window. After that he only watched from the side as Mao spoke fluently in Cantonese to the soldier. She showed him their operating permit and passes, and when she explained something to the soldier, he faced Sousuke and said, “Ho yi.”

“...?”

Mao poked Sousuke’s shoulder and pointed in front of the van.

“Nei tai. Ngodei ho yi jau laa.”

The gate in front of them started to noisily open. “Go” was what Sousuke interpreted it to mean, and he took off. It had been set up so that they would clear this first barrier without any problems.

They crossed through the tunnel that ran underneath Victoria Harbor. There were no other cars around. Their van was the only vehicle on the spacious three-lane road.

“This is unbelievable. This tunnel used to always be backed up.”

“It seems everything’s surprising.”

“Of course it is. Anyone who knew what Hong Kong was like before would be shocked.”

“Is that so?”

“Try to imagine how you would feel if Tokyo was like this.”

This surprising statement unexpectedly hit home to Sousuke.

“If Shinjuku and Ginza were divided in two, and the two sides were one step away from war. A town where there’s supposed to be fashion-conscious kids shopping or eating ice cream- now full of armored cars and ASes. On a bayside perfect for taking a stroll, there are gigantic pillboxes and hidden trenches. In Hong Kong, of all places! It’s weird. This world has gone mad.”

“...”

For the first time, Sousuke finally understood the “peace” of the city he had lived in for a half a year. There were no tanks. There were no ASes. There weren’t any policemen or soldiers

demanding bribes. Cars and people flooded the streets, and there were the sounds of lively music and laughter in the air.

Peaceful Tokyo. A peaceful school. A peaceful classroom.

And-

“Sousuke?”

“Hm?”

“What’s wrong?”

“...no, it’s nothing.”

Sousuke shook off the image of the face that almost came to mind.

“Be careful. There’s the South Army’s Gate.”

“Understood.”

They hadn’t reached the exit of the tunnel yet, but they could see the gate sealed up by wire netting. It was the entrance into the South China Army dominated Kowloon Peninsula. Hunter was supposed to have pulled some strings with this commander, as well. After two or three exchanges, the soldiers quickly let them pass.

“So this is how it is.”

“Surprising, huh?”

The two were disappointed that it had been so easy to pass inspection at both camps. It was strict guard, after all. They had prepared themselves for anything that would give them the slightest shiver.

“It appears that Hunter is a pretty important person.”

“I know, since he’s had influence with both of the armies up to this point. I can’t believe that he’s a completely respectable merchant.”

“Probably not.”

More than likely, he was in the business of buying the black market goods from the munitions stores of both armies.

Selling favors to the military leaders who were working hard to build their fortunes, while at the same time taking advantages of their weaknesses. For a member of the Intelligence Department it was killing two birds with one stone. Sousuke had seen a lot of trouble with men like that.

“We’re almost there now, it’s this area.”

They entered a street lined with modern hotels. This vicinity was one of the places on the list, right in the middle of a construction site for a trade center- the perfect place for an AS to hide. In Hong Kong, Malaysian merchants without much in the way of an actual track record were accepting these construction projects, and there were many various obscure points in their contracts.

“Wonder what we’ll do if we find it right off the bat.”

“There’s nothing to wonder. We should always have that intention.”

They passed in front of a wide park surrounded by hotels and shopping centers on three sides.

There was a South China Army AS standing guard at the entrance of the park. It was an early model “Bushnell” M6, a model intended for export and not equipped with ECS. Right next to it there was a British-made electric car. It was connected to an outside power supply, probably because it had been on standby for a long time.

That electric car...

He suddenly remembered. That electric car was the same model as the one that he had stolen from the enemy right after he had saved her in Shun On. She had made such a racket, making it hard to explain the situation to her. Without even trying to believe what he had told her, and with enemy bullets flying all around them, she had admonished him saying

“Sagara, get a grip. You’re confused and clinging to these wild ideas of yours!”

‘Sagara’...?

That’s right. That’s what she used to call me back then. When did she start calling me ‘Sousuke’? That’s definitely-

“Sousuke!?”

Mao screamed. Sousuke snapped back.

The van he was driving had just run the red light at an intersection.

It was a noisy pile up. There was a taxi coming from the left. He squealed the brakes. The van pitched forward, and the bumper scraped along the asphalt. There was a shrill sound, sparks, and impact. The taxi had torn off the van’s bumper.

The car went flying right as if it had been kicked, and glass and metal fragments scattered as it skidded sideways.



Sousuke and Mao’s van was stopped in the middle of the intersection.

The driver of the wrecked taxi jumped out of the car and was yelling something at them. Four soldiers from the park that they had just passed a moment ago were running to the scene. The M6 had not moved from where it was standing, but its head was fixedly staring in their direction.

The color drained from her face, Mao looked at Sousuke from the passenger side. She looked as if nothing would come out other than abusive language.

“... Anyway, let me handle it. You just stay quiet.”

“I-”

“Never mind, just don’t do anything!” she snapped, and got out of the van.

Mao headed towards the soldiers who were running up, and called out something in a very embarrassed voice.

“Mafaan chan nei...”

It probably meant something like “We’re sorry, he wasn’t careful.” However, without even responding to her somewhat stupefied remarks, they suddenly thrust their rifles at her.

Shut up, or something like that, they yelled at her.

The soldiers’ demeanor turned bloodthirsty at anything that went wrong, probably because these past few days of being on alert had worn down their nerves.

They caught Mao by the shoulder and forced her down on the ground, then pulled Sousuke out of the driver’s seat. They seized the driver of the taxicab as well in the same manner. The taxi cab driver cried out in a pitiful voice, clinging to the soldiers and pointing at Sousuke and Mao in blame.

With her hands tied behind her back, Mao was desperately explaining something to the soldiers. It was a cleverly pitiful voice that called out for sympathy, but its effectiveness was doubtful.

This was terrible.

A mistake in judgment during battle would have been better, but this was a traffic accident due to his carelessness. He had never made such a stupid mistake before. This was a failure that even Sousuke’s own pride could almost not accept. Being restrained like this went well beyond reconnaissance. He had to think of something- he thought.

Just then, a thunderous roar rose up from the M6 standing 30 meters away, and its knees dropped.

“...!?”

Its long, slender head was forcibly twisted off by some unknown power. Sparks and flames gushed from the neck, and with cables and pipes pulled out, it looked as if it were the severed head of some ghost floating out into the empty sky. The broken metal went into death throes. The stumpy figure of the M6 writhed, its arms and legs flitted around, and it tried to make a grab for its invisible attacker.

“Wa...”

The large body of the M6 let out a loud roar, and went flying like a slingshot.

Crossing over the road, it hit some hotels on the other side of the park, and pieces of concrete and glass flew everywhere. White dust suddenly arose, enshrouding the area in a solid cloud, when a large bolt of lightning flashed amid the confusion.

ECS Invisibility mode.

In the remnants of the blue light, one could see the shape of an AS.

Its upper body had the shape of an inverted triangle, with a head shaped like a diamond. It was gray and dark green camouflaged. It also had what you would never forget after the seeing it once- that one red eye.

It was Venom.

The soldiers gasped, their eyes fixed on the figure of that very ominous machine.

The Venom took the head of the M6 that it had just torn off and simply threw it on the road. The lump of a machine gun and deformed sensor fell on a Benz that was parked nearby, smashing its front windshield. The Venom then took the assault rifle from its back, aimed it at the M6, which was still trying to move, and opened fire full out at point-blank range. The M6 was helpless as its arms and legs were shot to pieces, and blew up.

The tremendous sound, hot wind and shock wave from the explosion reached all the way to the intersection where Sousuke and the others were. Mao grabbed the driver of the taxicab and forced him to the ground. Immediately after, when she noticed Sousuke standing there dumbfounded, her eyes widened in shock.

Hearing the uproar, another M6 on alert in a neighboring vicinity had rushed over. It exposed half of its body from behind the corner of a hotel across from Venom, and took aim with its rifle. Mao got up, this time jumping on Sousuke.

It shot.

The Venom raised its left arm. Just in front of it, numerous shells burst open. There was an invisible shield. The diverted ballistic shells hit the surrounding buildings and signboards, and a storm of destruction swept over the area.

“Gau meng a...!”

Even its movements were unpredictable. The soldiers screamed out amidst the chaos. Debris rained down incessantly all around Mao and Sousuke.

The Venom quickly crushed the newcomer M6 with its rifle, and then ran back towards Sousuke and Mao’s direction. Someone cried out in despair. The gray machine drew in close, then kicked the ground just in front of them. As if it had exploded, the asphalt was smashed into pieces by the impact. The Venom then suddenly disappeared.

“...”

Brushing away the thick dust, they looked up overhead. The Venom had landed on top of a twenty-story building. It had probably had used a wire gun to help it make it that far so fast. It had jumping capacity second only to that of the M9.

The machine’s red eye paid absolutely no attention to Sousuke and the others, but looked off in the distance. It had

probably confirmed the movement of the South China Army's forces.

After glaring over the entire vicinity, the Venom turned around and activated its ECS system. As its gray body became invisible, it disappeared beyond the rooftop.

That was the end of the battle.

The intersection was covered in smoke. A soldier whose arm was injured by some flying debris was making a loud racket. Another one appeared to be injured as well, saying "that's not it, this isn't it," very quickly. The one who appeared to have the most experience out of the four was yelling something into his radio, and the remaining soldier was just standing bewildered in the middle of the intersection.

The South China Army soldiers seemed to have completely lost interest in Mao and the others.

Mao started to talk to one of them, and after rattling off an answer to her, he hastily ran in the direction of the burning M6. She said something to the taxi driver and then pointed her thumb up at the van with Hunter's company written on it. He looked a little dissatisfied, but when Mao said something else, he then seemed to understand, and then walked back to his own car.

"Let's go," she whispered in a low voice in Sousuke's ear as she approached.

"Is it okay...?"

"He said 'If it hadn't been for your accident, we would've probably been crushed to death next to the M6, so we'll let it pass,'" she said, quickly getting into the now bumper-less van. Naturally, she got into the driver's side.

With no reason to cite dissatisfaction, Sousuke silently sat in the passenger seat.

A car accident and seeing Venom. Completely unexpected events happened as if they were pressing him for answers, and it disturbed Sousuke considerably. Being relieved of his guard duty of Kaname, his utter defeat to Clouseau in their match- it was the shock of all of them lined up together.

What in the world am I doing?

If Venom had not have shown up when it did, they would have probably been restrained by those South Army soldiers and been in even more trouble.

Where was the irony?

The irony. He had absolutely no control over this reality.

His arms and legs were numb and senseless as the feeling of helplessness ate at his mind and body. Right now for Sousuke, everything had stopped making sense.

Starting the engine, Mao said, “You missed the light. We could’ve died, you know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Were you thinking about her?”

“...”

When he didn’t say anything, Mao suddenly grabbed his lapel.

“Forget right now. If you can’t do that, then get out. You know the situation. But now- I’m not that nice of a babysitter. I’m not gonna die because of you...! If you’re gonna be like this, I’d be better off by myself.”

What she was saying was right. She took up this severe attitude especially because she recognized their equal relationship. Showing sympathy here, either as a colleague or as a friend, would be a mistake.

However, that correctness right now was helplessly unpleasant to Sousuke.

“...you’re right.”

Sousuke grabbed his bag with the radio and other equipment, and opened the passenger side door.

“Sousuke?”

“I’m sorry. I... can’t do this anymore.”

“Wai...”

“Please continue the mission.”

Getting out of the van, he stepped on the road now covered in building material and rubble, and walked off alone. He had nowhere to go, of course. Mao yelled something at him from behind, but he didn’t hear it.

It didn’t matter what happened. Nothing did. Not Mithril’s mission, Venom, Arbalest or Al, or the fate of this city.



October 22nd, 19:53 (Eastern China Standard Time)
Hong Kong Island Special Region, Sheung Wan

It had already been three hours since they parted with Mao and Sousuke.

In that time, Corporal Yang and Private First-class Wu had finished checking eleven of the possible hiding places on their list, and had come up with nothing.

Yang and Wu slowly drove through an area with a line of tall apartment buildings in one section of Sheung Wan. In this town, which was constructed on the slope of Mount Victoria, there were many steep and narrow curves.

“...I wanna drive.”

Being on a road such as this one, on the outskirts of his hometown of Daegu, brought back the excitement of that time

when he would attack the passes almost every night. And he kept asking himself “Why am I in this kind of place, doing this kind of mercenary work?”

The answer was because he had no money. Being the third son of the owner of a small car garage, he had not had the economical luxury to aim at being a racer. And it was even more ironic that he was favored more for his talent as a soldier than for his gift to drive. He grudgingly entered the army because of the draft, and while he grudgingly managed through his training, a commissioned officer on base spotted him and sent a letter of recommendation to the air force. After that, because of some mistake, even his own country was involved in a secret operations “battle”- he didn’t care what happened afterwards, though.

And yet, he was still here. In this van, in the passenger seat.

“No, Corporal,” Wu warned from beside him. “Don’t get anxious. If we screw something up, we’ll be killed by the president instead of our enemies.”

“...I know that. Look, we’re here.”

They stopped in front of a high-rise apartment building under construction. It had an ideal underground parking lot that an AS could hide in, and disreputable foreign merchants were accepting the construction work.

“The is Uruz 9. We’re about to inspect point 28. If there’s no contact for 15 minutes, shrink the perimeter.”

“Uruz 2, roger,” Mao’s voice replied curtly over the radio. For some reason, Souseki didn’t even reply once. He had heard about Venom showing up in Kowloon, but had there been some kind of trouble?

“Wanfu Headquarters, roger. Be careful.”

That was Hunter.

“Let’s go. Be on your toes, Wu.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

The two men got out of the van and approached the high-rise apartment building.

From Hunter’s information, it seemed that construction on this building had stopped three days ago. The reason seemed to be because of a “Labor Strike”, but that had not been confirmed.

Going around a bamboo scaffold and net, they entered into the dim building.

They took out their automatics with silencers attached. There was no sign of people inside. They went down the stairwell carefully so as not to make a sound. The entrance to the parking garage didn’t have a door. In front of the empty doorway, they strained to hear anything, and Yang signaled to Wu with a look and hand signal. Then they stepped noiselessly into the underground parking garage.

It was an empty concrete room. There were no cars at all—only construction equipment.

“Nothing. This is the eighth one—”

“Shhh...!”

In the shadow of some bags of carelessly piled cement, he saw a leg. Someone was lying on the other side of the cement bags. When Wu noticed, he shut his mouth.

While signaling warnings to each other, the two men approached the area.

It was a man in his forties, wearing dirty work clothes. He had been shot in the head.

“-buh... you think it’s one of the construction workers here?” Wu said, looking away from the corpse.

“Yeah. I guess he forgot something and when he unexpectedly came to get it, he ran across someone and they shot

him. Pity. I'd say it's been... around two days since he was killed," Yang said as he calmly searched the corpse.

With his bare hands, he opened up the mouth, which had small maggots coming out of it, and checked the mouth cavity. There didn't seem to be any kind of explosive device hidden inside.

"You know the time pretty well."

"The rigor mortis has relaxed, and decay has set in. Other factors, such as the mucous membranes drying out, the state of the eye sockets, and the color all indicate that's probably how long he's been dead. But there's no way to pinpoint an exact time of death without an autopsy."

"Ha hah... this was a safe house, then?"

"I don't know. Anyway, even if he had used it as one of his hiding places, the enemy probably won't come near here again. Anyway, keep an eye out for the criminal's 'parting gift'."

"Parting gift?"

"A trap. A bomb in place of an alarm."

Suddenly looking extremely uneasy, Wu looked back and forth all over the area.

"It's alright. Just don't touch anything other than what I've already touched. Got it?"

"Understood. Just... you're definitely in the SRT."

"Huh?"

"No, never mind... anyway, that's man's chest..."

"Right."

Yang also had noticed. He could see a strange stain on the T-shirt the body was wearing underneath his work uniform. At first he had thought it was the color of faded blood, but that didn't seem to be it. While watching for any traps, he very carefully pulled down the zipper.

It wasn't a stain. It was a message written in magic marker, in English.

"To the Tiger Cub of Badakhshan. Meet Hamidallah in Tsim Sha Tsui."

That was all.

"...do you understand what it means?"

"Not at all," Yang shrugged, and turned the radio on.



October 22nd, 16:14 (Eastern China Standard Time)
South China Sea, Tuatha de Danaan

It was extremely congested overhead. Because it was now prohibited to enter the port, many ships were now on standby just on this side of Hong Kong.

Because of the number of ships that didn't think this was normal, it was the first time that the sonar room and TMA system had been this busy since the ship had first set out.

Tessa decided to have her own ship approach by creeping along the bottom of the ocean floor. If they unskillfully tried to rise up to periscope depth, they would be in danger of it colliding with the merchant ships. While very carefully probing the floor's terrain with high frequency sonar, they slowly moved along, making it look like the dance of a whale. It was a maneuver that not only took time, but was also grating on the nerves; however, it was better than being detected by South China Army patrols.

<Captain. There is an incoming message from the Intelligence Department.>

The ship's AI, Dana, informed her. Tessa looked over the information.

The situation had gotten much worse. The North China Army was starting to believe that Venom's destruction was mostly the handiwork of the South Army.

The North China Army was calling the spread of destruction into districts on the South Army's side "a lesson learned from their own mistake". Chairman You Shoukon^{*3} of the Beijing Government (People's Liberation Committee) proclaimed, "If the risky provocation of the Guangzhou puppet force continues, we will prepare to raise appropriate military action in order to protect the interests of the citizens of China." From the looks of the Northern China Army on the footage captured by Mithril's spy satellites, it was clear that this was not just a threat.

The Belvedere Secretary-General of the Guangzhou Administration (Chinese Democratic Alliance) Chou Kou^{*4} also appeared in a mass communication to the west side, criticizing the reaction of the North side. The reason: "Beijing is using this situation to try to gain control over the Sanxia Dam. We, the democratic government, will not yield to any kind of military threat made by the North Army." The South Army forces were also entering into a response formation.

The North Army had set the time limit. Today at 2200 hours. They were basically saying that until then, as far as the conclusion of the situation in Hong Kong, if the South Army didn't show some kind of good faith, whatever happened after that would not be their responsibility.

In other words, the revival of the civil war. Meaning that many people would be caught up in the war and die.

Tessa looked at the clock. Right now it was 1631 Hours. There were only five hours left.

"That's not enough time. What a thing to say..."

She was right. There wasn't enough time. If they would just wait another eight hours, Mithril would bag Venom. The reconnaissance mission of Mao's group and the Intelligence department had been designed for at least that much time.

What were Mithril's upper levels doing right now? If they didn't persuade both armies using the intelligence that they possessed, then there would be nothing that her own force could do by themselves. Did they plan on entrusting everything to a 16-year-old commander and a squadron of 200 men and women?

“Connect to the Department of Operations Headquarters. Line G3.”

<Although very small, there is a risk of interception on line G3.>

“I don't care. Hurry.”

<Aye Ma'am... There is a message on G1. It is Uruz 2.>

This time it was a communication from Hong Kong. It was urgent.

“Put it through.”

<Yes Ma'am.>

It was Mao reporting from Hong Kong.

It was about the strange message and dead body that Corporal Yang found. In the second instance, the Information Bureau's reconnaissance team discovered the same message in an entirely different place. It wasn't on a corpse, but had been scribbled on the walls and floor. And in the third instance, the same message had appeared in a three-line classified advertisement in a local newspaper.

““To the Tiger Cub of Badakhshan'...?”

Tessa raised her eyebrows when she heard the message.

“I wonder what that means? It doesn't sound like a threat... or a diversion,” Mardukas said.

Tessa had heard of Badakhshan before. It had been four months already, but there were two people around her who had deep involvement in that area.

The ship's AI, Dana, analyzed the message, but not matter what kind of cryptanalysis it used, it was not able to guess as to the meaning.

“Badakhshan” was the name of an area in Northeast Afghanistan. “Tsim Sha Tsui” was talking about the district in the heart of the Kowloon Peninsula. And “Hamidallah” was a very common Arabian name. They found four people when they looked up residents by the name of “Hamidallah” in Hong Kong. They sent orders to the Intelligence Department asking them to catch these four people.

Just then, Kalinin came up from the hangar.

“I'm back.”

“Perfect timing, Lt. Commander. Please take a look at this.”

When he looked at the message on the display screen, the wrinkle in his brow became even deeper.

“Do you understand something, Mr. Kalinin?”

“...one part of it. The ‘Tiger of Badakhshan’ is the nickname of the legendary commander of some Afghani Guerrillas.”

“Afghani...?”

“Yes, Ma'am. I fought him many times, as well. In order to get rid of him, the Soviets would often send assassins to his camp. There was one assassin there who wasn't even eight years old. However, the assassination attempt failed completely. Deeply compassionate, he took in the very young assassin as his own, and gave him a new name. That name was-”

Kalinin was quiet for a moment, then continued.

“‘Kashim’.”

“...Kashim.”

She recognized that name from the Arbalest’s mission recorder during the sea jacking incident two months before.

“Captain. Can we get a hold of Sergeant Sagara?”

“Yes... TDD-HQ to Uruz 2. Put Uruz 7 on the line.”

“This is Uruz 2. Umm, well...” she said over the noise, with hesitation in her voice.

“What is it?”

“I’m sorry. Uruz 7... isn’t here.”

◆ ◆ ◆

October 22nd, 17:08 (Eastern China Standard Time)
Kowloon Peninsula Special Region (“Chinese Democratic Alliance” Side)

A weak wind swept by, blowing garbage across the road.

This is a strange scene, thought Sousuke.

There were numerous signboards. There were numerous shops. Normally, this district would probably be cluttered with shoppers and automobiles.

Now it looked as if it were ruins.

Even Sousuke didn’t know where he would go from here.

No kind of plan came to him. If his body were the body of an AS, he wanted to hand over the controls of the machine to someone else. Almost like that white AS, right now his own existence was an unpleasant thing.

Mithril would probably not trust him a second time, now that he had abandoned his mission. When he thought of the looks of disappointment on his colleagues’ faces, as well as the looks of contempt, his heart felt like it had fallen into his stomach. Even

with the Arbalest, he didn't think they would want to rely on him anymore.

He also thought a little about returning to Tokyo.

However, he would no longer be a student at that school, nor would he have a place to live. He also wouldn't have a mission to guard Kaname. Also- he couldn't earn a living there, since there was no war. His only saving grace was his ability to fight. He didn't know how to do anything else.

Maybe going north of this city into the mainland of China would be a good idea. As long as he had money, he could head North or West, and he would surely hit a war zone along the way. And they would probably have an unlimited need for mercenaries. He would live fighting one battle after the next, without principles or pretensions, just like he did before he joined Mithril. And then he would die like that one day.

That was starting to sound like an attractive plan.

What would his colleagues do in this kind of situation? The mercenaries he had met before joining Mithril would often drink. They would drink like they were bathing in it, make a lot of noise, fight with each other, then throw up all over the place. It didn't really look like much fun, but even so, it seemed like some kind of diversion. That was what alcohol was for.

Alcohol...huh?

I'll try it, he thought to himself. According to what the old soldier Jacob had taught him, drinking was a foolish act. But because of the circumstances, Sousuke didn't care. And in any case, Jacob was dead.

There was a 7-11 open. Impressed a little, he walked inside. Most of the grocery shelves were empty. The neighborhood residents must have bought them up because of the uproar.

Sousuke grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniel's and an English newspaper and went to the register. When he paid with the 500-dollar bill he had, the middle-aged female clerk gave him a hateful look and handed him back a lot of small change.

He walked to a small park about a block away, and then opened the bottle of whiskey.

Without hesitating at all he gulped down a large drink. A moment later, there was a strange pain followed by a sudden rush of fever that felt like his throat was burning. He immediately choked and started coughing violently.

It was a terrible taste. Why did everyone drink this stuff like it tasted good? Jacob was right.

He threw the bottle in the recycling bin and opened up the newspaper. All the articles were about Venom, but of course, they didn't know the code name "Venom". They listed all sorts of information about the mystery AS as well as all sorts of speculation, and there was a list of the comments made by military critics. Frightened citizens. Evacuation highway congestion. The impact on the economy. Everything was terrible.

Then suddenly- his eyes stopped on one of the small advertisements in the classifieds.

"To the Tiger Cub of Badakhshan. Meet Hamidallah in Tsim Sha Tsui."

More than likely, that message was meant for him- and Sousuke realized at a glance that he was probably the only one in the world who could discern its meaning.



It was barely a ten-minute walk from Jordon to Tsim Sha Tsui.

His head felt a little clouded and as if his field of vision had narrowed. Probably because of the drink earlier.

He went into a lone open tourist camera shop, and asked the salesperson questions about this and that.

“If you’re looking for an office block full of Arab stores, there’s one near here,” the salesperson answered in perfect English. Sōsuke thanked him, and headed that way.

There were a number of dark-skinned young men with mustaches hanging around in the narrow entrance. They stared at Sōsuke, but none of them went out of their way to talk to him.

The block was crammed full of small shops all muddled together. It was mainly a marketplace and a very noisy area.

In great contrast to the quiet main street, inside people were overflowing. Many various goods- clothing, foodstuffs, electronics, and video software, were jutting out on display into the narrow pathways as they usually did. Popular music was blaring from somewhere, people were doing business in loud voices, and men with time on their hands were shooting the breeze with each other about various things. It didn’t look like this area was concerned at all about the threat from Venom.

All of the men going back and forth through these pathways were Arabs, probably men who came all the way here to work here. Most of them were from Iran, but he could also see a number of black people from Africa.

“Is there an electronics shop run by an Afghani? Or a Turkish person would do, too,” Sōsuke tried asking a man idling at a T-shirt shop in the Afghan dialect of Persian^{*5}. He was surprised by how rusty his pronunciation was.

The man didn’t answer him. He simply looked at Sōsuke blankly with his mouth half-open.

Sousuke repeated the question, but the man still didn't answer.

He gave up, then asked the shopkeeper in the CD shop next door.

"Third corner up ahead, on the right. There's a sign for it inside," the shopkeeper told Sousuke without even trying to sell his goods to him, and pointed to the opening to a narrow passageway.

He then said in a thin, low voice, "I won't say anything bad. When you've finished your business, hurry up and leave the building. You look like a cute little kid here."

"I know."

Certainly a number of the people passing by were looking at Sousuke like that. Since he was a 16-year-old Asian male with smooth skin and no beard or body odor, there was nothing he could do about it. Even when he had been with the other group of guerrillas a long time ago, they had always been unusually kind to him. There were also many times when it seemed that they would attack him in his sleep.

Sousuke soon found the shop he was looking for.

It had an old, worn-out neon sign. It was an electronics store.

"To the Tiger Cub of Badakhshan. Meet Hamidallah in Tsim Sha Tsui."

To Sousuke, that message was a very simple code.

The Tiger of Badakhshan. That was the nickname of a man called Majid, who won fame from leading one of the Afghani guerrilla groups. He was a tactician beyond compare when it came to fighting in mountainous areas, a poet, and a scholar in architecture as well.

Until the early nineties, his band of guerrillas was invincible. But when the Soviets brought ASes into Afghanistan,

the situation changed completely. Unlike the land weapons that they had used up until then, the human-shaped weapon called “AS” could move freely into the impregnable mountainous region. There really wasn’t any way for the flesh and blood guerrillas to oppose these new weapons. Majid’s forces fought a good fight, but for several years they took too much damage and were substantially annihilated.

The whereabouts of Majid himself since then were unknown. Sousuke didn’t even know whether he was dead or alive.

Until three years ago, Sousuke had been a member of those guerrillas. The name “Kashim” had been given to him by Majid. When the war situation still looked favorable, Majid had given custody of Kashim to his right-hand man, the old soldier Jacob, and ordered him to teach him the art of war as well as compassion and mercy.

So in other words, “The Tiger Cub of Badakhshan” was talking about Sousuke. Majid had many other sons, but when he read that one sentence, he didn’t think that possibility was likely.

“Hamidallah” was the name of one of Sousuke’s dead associates. He had formerly owned an electronics store in Kabul, and when he lost his shop in the civil war, he joined with the guerrillas. Hamidallah repaired half-damaged enemy ASes so that Sousuke could use them. Lt. Commander Kalinin also had an acquaintance with Hamidallah, but he wouldn’t know his name or occupation. Because of that, even the Lt. Commander wouldn’t understand this code word. Sousuke was the only one who would know the dead guerrilla soldiers.

This message more than likely was saying “To Sousuke Sagara. Meet the Afghani owner of the electronics shop in Tsim Sha Tsui.” He couldn’t think of anything else.

Was one of his former colleagues still alive? No, that wasn't it. He had seen their bodies with his own eyes.

Then maybe one of their friends or family members...?

It was possible. But if it were, how did they know that he would come here to Hong Kong? Did that mean that there was some connection with the Venom disturbances...?

Was this a trap, or someone trying to help? He didn't know.

But he couldn't disregard it.

He had come this far.

The electronics store was in the very middle of the dim pathway. There was no sign of anyone there. He reached for the pistol that he always kept underneath his work clothes, and checked to see if there were any guards. The feeling that someone was following him was probably sheer habit, but he felt foolish a moment later. He didn't have a mission now. Even if he did die, no one would care.

He looked into the shop. There was an old man sitting alone inside whom he didn't recognize. Sousuke approached him, but before he could say anything the old man opened his mouth.

“Are you Majid's son, Kashim?”

“That's right.”

“You stink of whiskey... worthless brat. You trying to disgrace the name of Badakhshan Tiger?”

“You know about it? Tell me your business.”

The old man looked displeased as he thrust out his left hand. He was holding a small folded up piece of paper.

“I was only asked to give this to you.”

“By who?”

“A man from Hong Kong. I don't know anything else. Now take it and scram!”

Sousuke took the piece of paper, and without saying any word of thanks to the man, left the shop.

He opened the note. It was one section of a tourist map.

The fountain in the Kowloon Park a few hundred meters away had been circled in red.



October 22nd, 18:09 (Eastern China Standard Time)
South China Sea, Tuatha de Danaan

In order to save time, they communicated with the Operations Headquarters over a real-time G-line. Even while they were notifying them, the situation had become rather sticky.

“There is no longer any time to waste on reconnaissance. We’re discontinuing the plan to sneak up on him,” the voice of Admiral Borda echoed painfully.

“The TDD-1 is to deploy all of its M9s. Bring it down with a concentrated force. However, use of the Arbalest is prohibited. I don’t want that machine jeopardizing that mission.”

“P... please wait,” Tessa protested, leaning out of her Captain’s chair. “The counter-measures against Venom are still incomplete. If we make them sortie like this, we don’t know what kind of damage they will receive. At least give us two more hours.”

“I can’t. Even Sir Mallory agrees.”

“But-”

“The tension between the North and South army is at its limit. And there are more casualties each time Venom appears. We can’t allow any more damage. How many more people should we let die by ‘waiting’?”

It was a harsh thing to say, and Tessa lost the will to object to the Admiral's point.

"The Venom's weaknesses are exposed during the time that it's operational. We have no choice but to take advantage of them. We will be relying on your subordinates, so for that reason, they will be the most elite."

This was different from a normal mission. Most of the pilots who would go out on this mission might not be coming back. This order was more than just understanding that.

"It's hard, isn't it, Teletha. But I told you about the precariousness of the road you're following. And even though you knew that, you didn't separate yourself from that chair. Am I wrong?"

"...no. It's just as you say."

"Right. Then execute the mission, Captain Teletha Testarossa."

"...roger."

She ended the transmission, and took off her headset.

With her head bent down, she told Mardukas, "Surface to periscope depth. Have the M9s on standby depart underwater. Also, please have the ARX-7 equipped with an emergency expansion booster. Arm it with a Boxer Shot Cannon and have it on standby in the elevator."

"Captain. Wasn't use of the Arbalest prohibited just now...?"

"We'll use it as a decoy. Even if it's only by a little bit, I want to decrease the danger to the M9 team as much as possible. Besides... Sagara is still..." Tessa mumbled, to which Mardukas gave a small rebuke.

"You say that, Captain. But you have to take into consideration that Sagara abandoned his mission. It's an obvious mistake to rely on him or that AS."

“That’s not the only thing, is it?”

“This isn’t a school club activity.”

“I’m well aware of that. Are you lecturing me?”

The voices of the Captain and Vice-Captain resounded all throughout the command center. Even the crew was watching them in astonishment. Mardukas noticed this and hesitated for a moment, but without losing his determination, he continued his admonitions.

“No, but I won’t keep silent this time. You’re going by your own interests and going so far as to twist the orders from headquarters. What about structure and discipline? Giving special treatment to an officer who abandons his mission is out of the question!” the veteran officer said in a voice so severe that it would make one cringe, but Tessa didn’t back down.

“Very well. Then tell me, who are the ones that always get a ridiculous amount of responsibility forced on them?”

“That’s-”

“We are! Correct me if I’m wrong!”

“...”

“Six months ago, who was the one who brought us valuable information in an air field full of enemies with no regard for his own safety? Four months ago, who was the one who fought in an impromptu performance against an enemy so powerful that it made Venom look like nothing, and won? And two months ago, who was the one who struggled to protect this ship?”

“Tha...”

“Say it! Who was it!?” The command center was completely silent. Mardukas was stunned for a little bit, but he sighed and said it.

“...Sergeant Sagara.”

“That’s right. Yet you still condemn him? Do you think he’s that much of a coward?”

“...no.”

“I’ll admit it since you want me to. I like him. But my feelings have nothing to do with this. I give you my word; he will definitely come to help. He could never forsake us. No matter how bleak it may look right now, human nature does not change. He-he’s strong, and kind.”

“Strong and kind?” Mardukas said after a very long pause. “Captain, am I supposed to be satisfied by that?”

“That’s not the issue, is it? Do you trust me? Or do you not? Every time up till now- everything I’ve done up till now. Choose!” she said resolutely.

The Commander turned his back to the Captain, and took off his hat. He looked down at the hat that he had received a long time ago from someone as a memento, and ran his thumb along the embroidery.

“You’ve become quite strong,” Richard Mardukas said, as if he were alone. “Roger, Captain. We’ll put the Arbalest on standby.”

“Thank you. I... just want everyone to come back safe,” she said downheartedly.



As a matter of fact, their quarrel had somehow been broadcast throughout the ship, and had been directed through to the M9 pilots on standby.

“...that’s what I’m saying. The communication just started by itself. Did someone want us to hear it on purpose?” Kurz said to four of pilots on standby over a private line.

“No... I don’t know,” Lieutenant Clouseau replied.

“Perhaps the Lt. Commander?”

“Maybe.”

“Besides, what they said about him abandoning the mission... is that true? Sagara did? I can’t believe it,” said “Uruz 8”, Corporal Spake.

“That’s only what the Commander said. Don’t believe everything you hear.”

“Have you not heard anything, Lieutenant Clouseau?”

“I’ve heard the particulars. However, I can’t judge based on just that. Lt. Commander Kalinin feels the same way. Either way, Sagara and the Arbalest have immeasurable power.”

“What do you think, Roger?”

“...I don’t know what kind of person Sagara is. But the Captain did have a point. A falcon is a falcon till the day it dies.”

“A falcon is a falcon... huh?”

After they had expressed their thoughts for a while, the SRT men resumed checking their machines.

“Even so, for Tessa to argue so intensely with the Commander...”

“She likes Sagara, right? They are the same age.”

“That’s not the only reason,” Kurz said in almost a criticizing voice.

“I just want everyone to return safely,’ is what she said. What do you think, gentlemen?”

“Of course she would want that,” said Clouseau.

“It’s not like we can make our princess mourn for us, now can we?” said “Uruz 3”, Lieutenant Castero.

“She’s been worried about us before now. What, was she moved to expressing her true feelings?” said Corporal Spake.

“That’s enough,” said “Uruz 5”, Lieutenant Roger Sandarapta.

Everyone sank into their own thoughts. There were thoughts of Danigan and Guen, but they thankfully and uncertainly believed in Tessa, who trusted them absolutely.

Just then, the order from the command center for all units to sortie came over the regular line.

“This is Uruz 1, gentlemen. You heard the order, right? We will meet up with Uruz 2 at the actual place, then stand by on alert. All of the orders will be given by Lt. Commander Kalinin from the air. If you are a pro, live up to his expectations. I won’t make a mistake. You guys won’t mess up, either. If you don’t, then everything will work out. Got it?”

“Roger.”



October 22nd, 18:24 (Eastern China Standard Time)
Hong Kong Island Special Region (“People’s
Liberation Committee” Side)
Mithril’s Intelligence Department, Hong Kong Branch
Office

The same altered orders that Teletha Testarossa now faced had been handed down to Hunter from the head of the Intelligence Department, General Amit.

“...in other words, our time is up?”

“That’s correct. We will leave the rest to the Operations Department.”

“Understood.”

“Very well, then.”

When Amit’s figure disappeared from the screen, Hunter cursed out in a loud voice.

“God damn it!”

Just when he thought that taking on a favor from Melissa Mao and her superiors and dividing up his valuable people would somehow result in them catching the enemy by the tail. If only- if only they would give him two more hours. If they did, then maybe they could make it through this without much gunfire.

“President... excuse me? President Hunter?” his native Hong Kong secretary said as he entered his office.

“What is it?”

“Visitors to see you, Sir. They came in earlier, saying they had some urgent business...”

“Send them away, please. Right now I’m in an exceedingly bad mood. I don’t care what excuse you give.”

“U-understood.”

The secretary started to bow, but then the two guests stepped into Hunter’s office, pushing the secretary out of the way. One of the people was an old friend from the Intelligence Department, and the other- was an Asian person he had never seen before.

“Hey, old man? Just how long are you planning on making us wait!?” the girl yelled as she approached Hunter.



October 22nd, 18:31 (Eastern China Standard Time)
Kowloon Peninsula Special Region (“Chinese Democratic Alliance” Side), Kowloon Park

With the tourist’s map in one hand, Sousuke walked to the deserted park.

In the middle of the Kowloon Peninsula, which was full of buildings, it was a place that opened up like a green island- that

was Kowloon Park. The atmosphere was like that of Central Park in Shinjuku.

There was a fountain with the water stopped. It was the place marked on the map. Without showing any caution, Sousuke sat down on the bench beside it. It would be troublesome to check the area, and he just really didn't feel like doing it. If someone wanted to kill him, that was fine with him. It would be easier that way.

The streetlights were bright. He could see tall buildings lined up in the distance. There were about five very low but perfect places to snipe him from.

No one came. Five minutes passed.

An electronic sound rang from a nearby wastebasket. He moved over and looked inside. Underneath a snack cake wrapper was a ringing cell phone.

He picked up the cell phone and pressed the respond key.

“This is Sousuke Sagara, right?” said the voice of an unknown man.

“That's right.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“There's a taxi waiting at the North exit of the park. Take the cell phone and get in it.”

That was all he said, then the call cut off. Sousuke heavily stood up, then made his way to the North exit.

When he left the park, there was a taxi stopped in front of a convenient store. There were no other vehicles; only the sound of an ambulance siren in the distance.

He got into the taxi, and after the driver said something to him they took off. It didn't look like the driver understood English, and Sousuke didn't understand what the driver said. They went

north on the main street, going towards the squalid downtown area. There were very few people out.

The taxi stopped in front of a hardware store with the shutters down. The driver motioned Sousuke to “get out”. It seemed that he didn’t need to be paid.

The taxi then took off.

The downtown area was still and silent this evening. Countless signboards covered up the gray colored sky.

The ringing of the cell phone in Sousuke’s hand resounded against the lonely street lamps.

“There should be a yellow signboard. Inside, there’s a key in postbox number 13. Get it,” the man’s voice told him. On the other end of the line, some kind of power source let out a humming sound.

“Next to it is a staircase. Go to the second floor. There will be a corridor. Open the fifth door and go in. ‘He’ is waiting for you.”

“‘He’? Who are you talking about?”

“Think about the name of this place.”

The phone hung up and that was it.

<九龍寨城>

Kowloon Walled City. It didn’t ring a bell.

No- Kowloon.

No. It couldn’t be. It was impossible. This time?

But now everything made sense.

Since he had come this far he couldn’t turn back now.

Sousuke did just as the man over the phone had instructed him, taking the key from the postbox and going up the stairs next to the hardware store. He walked down the corridor of apartments, and stopped in front of the fifth door.

“...”

Even Sousuke, who had lost most of his will, felt a good amount of tension come back to him. He inserted the key and opened the door. Inside was a cramped, one room apartment. It was even smaller than his apartment in Tokyo, and had almost no furniture at all.

Sousuke slowly made his way into the dark room. He was unconsciously aware of himself looking for wire or laser traps. Before he knew it, he had drawn out his automatic. He was a fool. This was a trap, and he was walking straight into it headfirst.

Even so, he didn't stop.

He moved into the living room. Light poured in through the window. In the center of the room, in the deep darkness, there was a bed. Someone was lying on that bed.

“Yo...” an electronic voice reverberated in the pitch-darkness. But- it was speaking Japanese.

“I've been waiting a long time, Kashim.”

The reflection of a car's headlights from outside of the window, just for a moment, illuminated the face of the man lying on the bed. When he saw that face- even though its features were drastically different from before, Sousuke muttered:

“Gauron.”⁶



In the Cantonese dialect, the characters <九龍> were pronounced as “Gauron”.

Kowloon Peninsula. Kowloon Park. Kowloon Castle.

Why hadn't he noticed it? No, why had he noticed it, but hadn't thought of him? Also- he even knew his name of “Kashim”. Even though he was the only one other than Kalinin to know about him and Hamidallah.

But there shouldn't be any reason for him to still be alive.

“Gauron...”

He was a small man.

His arms were gone. His legs were gone. All that was left were his right thigh and the upper part of his left arm- other than that, all four of his limbs were missing.

There were quite a few intravenous drips and tubes. There were a number of cords connected to medical appliances, which were making low, humming noises. He probably could no longer live without them.

His face was in pitiful shape, as well.

The skin on the left half of the face was peeling off and becoming keloidal. The left eye had been crushed, and in the socket where an eyeball was supposed to be, there was only a gaping hole. His mouth drew up and he smiled at Sousuke.

That man, lying on a clean bed and with just one eye, gazed at Sousuke in delight.

“I’m glad to see you, Kashim,” said an electronic voice. It was the sound of an electronic voice box.

“You want something to drink? I’m afraid this place is self-service, though.”

“Why are you-”

“‘Still alive?’, right? That’s the third time you’ve asked me that. But don’t worry. This will be the last.”

A rough, dry noise echoed through the room. He was probably laughing.

“You haven’t forgotten, now have you? That my Codarl was equipped with a Lambda Driver? When the time came, it was able to protect the operator from self-destruction... well, at least as much protection as this. Heh heh heh.”

“How did you survive in that storm...”

“A fishing boat unexpectedly passed through the area. Half of my body had already become fish food. The sea is a mysterious thing, you know. I’m half dead. I’m in a pretty horrible state.”

Sousuke pointed his gun at Gauron’s head.

“I’ll put you out of your misery, this time for sure.”

“That’s fine by me. But look at the state I’m in. I don’t think you can speed it up by much.”

“...what do you want?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Get serious.”

“I’m telling the truth. Heh heh... as you can see, my time is almost up. That was the reason for the elaborate act up till now. I stole the Codarl M from my organization and set it loose on this city. I figured that if I did, you and that white AS would be called out here. I went ahead and scattered that message all over the city, in places you would investigate, as well as the media you might run across. That kind of thing.”

The classified ad that Sousuke read was one of them. Maybe Mao or Yang had also found that message, but they wouldn’t understand its meaning.

“And so you’ve come. I thought you might bring along your friends, but... you’re alone. What happened?”

“It’s none of your business,” Sousuke tried saying in a composed manner, but Gauron appeared to be having a small problem with air, and gave out a somber laugh.

“Hmm, I wonder if that means you’ve become uncomfortable? ...heh heh heh.”

“What?”

“In Mithril, I mean. Being in a unit that has the pretensions of being on the side of justice- it would get on anybody’s nerves. Especially a man like you.”

Get on anybody's nerves- Sousuke could not deny those words. Since he didn't feel like talking about it, Sousuke changed the subject.

“Tell me about the organization supporting you.”

“And yet your work is still important to you? Heh heh heh...”

“...”

“Fine. This is a service to you. It's also some revenge on my colleagues,” he stated flatly, and began his verbose explanation.

“‘Amalgam’. That's the name of the organization that I was working for. Its objectives for now are the research and development of new weapons and testing them in combat. It's for that reason that they wage terrorism and cause regional conflicts. There are a large number of Amalgam sympathizers who have penetrated into the hard-line factions of each nation. There are a lot of guys in the east and west who want cold war formation and munitions preservation. The fifth dispute in the middle east, the Chinese Civil War between the north and south, the Soviet Civil War- it's said that Amalgam had a hand in all of them.”

“And the trouble here in Hong Kong, as well?”

“...heh heh heh. That's my handiwork. Right now Amalgam is probably all in a panic. A long time ago, I raised a couple of brothers whose circumstances were a lot like your own. I ordered them to cause this riot. Just look at these clean sheets. This is also the best medical equipment money can buy. Those guys' devotion really brings tears to my eye.”

“And the Venom's chaos...?”

“If you're talking about the Codarl M, yes.”

“Where is it hidden?”

“No reason to tell you, is there? What's in that bag? The answer- a radio. I'm not that senile yet.”

“Tell me.”

He pointed his gun. Gauron only laughed.

“Hey, hey. If you think I care about living, then you’re the one who’s senile.”

Reluctantly, Sousuke lowered his gun.

“...you called it ‘Amalgam’, right? Are there any ‘Whispered’ in this organization?”

“There now, that’s the kind of question to ask. The answer is yes. Actually, he’s becoming one of the leading members. He’s a disgusting brat, but he’s interesting.”

“If there’s a ‘Whispered’ there, then why are they targeting Kaname Chidori? They don’t need her, right?”

“Because it’s not perfect. It seems that the information brought about by a ‘Whispered’ is different depending on the individual. If there’s a person whose strength is in the theory of Lambda Driver technology, then there’s one whose only strength is in submarine technology. There are different areas, so when a new ‘Whispered’ has been discovered, it’s necessary to first find out where his or her strength lies. It seems the examination of that girl in Shun On was to find out whether or not she really was a ‘Whispered’, and then find out what type of individual she was.”

“What were the results?”

“She’s a ‘Whispered’ without a doubt... but I wasn’t told what kind of ‘specialist’ she was. Amalgam’s intentions were ‘to watch her carefully’. It would have been a better story if they had checked out kidnapping her again, though. I don’t know their reasons.”

“Where is Amalgam’s base? Who are the main people?”

“Heh heh heh... you’re going to keep pumping me for information, huh? A hint is ‘Badham’.”

“Badham?”

“I’m not going to tell you anything else, now. Give me a break, this conversation isn’t interesting. Although I don’t mind talking at all. Boring talk- this isn’t the point,” Gauron said in a bemused manner as Sousuke looked silently down upon his drawn-up face. He was thinking of how disgusting it would be to suck up to this man even just a little bit, but even so, he said:

“Tell me. Please.”

That will definitely make him happy, Sousuke thought as he clenched his teeth and waited for an answer.

However, Gauron was not pleased.

On the contrary, he shot Sousuke a look of open scorn and impatience.

“‘Please’, huh? Hearing those words from you makes me wanna puke.”

“What...?”

“Did you sell your soul to those revolting Mithril scumbags?”

“Revolting?”

“That’s right. Cough, cough... here’s the point,” Gauron said after he coughed. “Think about it. An organization that has no telling how many billions of dollars invested in it, and uses that kind of submarine? What I’m saying may be a little embarrassing, but how many tens of thousands of poor people do you think you can save with that same money? Controlling regional conflicts? Making peace? It’s all a joke. How is Amalgam different? They always dig wells in poor countries first. Don’t you agree?”

“That’s just covering up the problem.”

“Exactly. But there’s no way to mop up the suspicion. The betrayal of those guys Danigan and Guen was rather pleasing.”

“...”

“And you’re in that same Mithril. To me, the you right now is hopelessly unnatural. That Kashim. He was indifferent to anything except his own life. He was as emotionless as a puppet. Just like a loyal pet dog, that Kashim would just keep on killing enemies.”

When he said this, Sousuke’s memories of the time before he joined Mithril came back to him.

“You remember. What were you doing the first time I met you?”

That was already five years ago.



Gauron was a mercenary training camp instructor who had been placed in the Afghanistan territories. Kashim was a guerrilla soldier fighting against the Soviet forces in the mountain districts no too far from Gauron’s camp. Their encounter was somewhat of a coincidence, and at that time the two were not enemies. Of course they weren’t allies, either, but their mutual interests did not oppose one another’s.

The first time Gauron met him, Kashim had destroyed part of a platoon of Soviet ASes, and was in the middle of arranging the bodies of the enemy soldiers.

Even to this day, he remembered the first thing Gauron ever said to him.

“You’re working pretty hard there, kid. Did you kill all of those guys?” Gauron had said to him.

He had been passing by and had pulled his jeep over to the side of the road. He still had all four of his burly limbs, and there was no scar on his forehead.

“Yes.”

Kashim answered, and he looked out over the scattered wreckage of ASes and armored vehicles, as well as the corpses of charcoaled bodies lying around the area. There was only one machine in the middle of all of this, his own Rk-92, which was in a kneeling position.

Gauron then gave him the same kind of dark smile that he was giving him now, and said:

“If that’s so, then I truly look forward to you in the future. What’s your name?”

“Kashim.”

“Kashim. You guys are losing the war in this area at the moment. Why don’t you come to my camp? There’s food, ammunition and AS parts there.”

“I refuse.”

“I see. Well, keep going strong, then.”

And Gauron sped off. Kashim returned to arranging the bodies.

And that was all for that encounter.



“You were silently arranging those charred corpses,” Gauron said. “When I was the same age, I was in Cambodia. And every day, I silently arranged the corpses of the people my Pol Pot colleagues had massacred. So at that time, I didn’t feel like you were a stranger... heh heh.”

“What... do you mean?”

“Back then, you truly had a good look in your eyes. No worries, no hesitation, no pain. They were the eyes of a wild animal- no, a saint. You wouldn’t be taken by surprise no matter what happened. You would kill a person as easily as taking a

breath, and there was no value in the loss of a human life to you. I think it's alright to call that 'beautiful'. Do you understand? In other words, you were consistent. You had no contradictions. Well? I'm quite the philosopher, ain't I?"



“...”

“Then we met again in Shun On. I was overjoyed... heh heh. Even then you had the same look in your eyes. You were indifferent to human life. It would be wonderful to kill that kind of you, I thought. I thought about dragging your dead body out of that AS and fucking it up the ass. Nah, just kidding. Heh heh... Eeee-, he he he! No, no, seriously!”

The man who was no more than a large cushion laughed out loud in a frightening voice, shaking on top of the bed. It was a horrible sight that would have made anyone watching it shudder.

“So- what’s that face for?” Gauron said and he stopped laughing altogether.

“What?”

“Your face looks like that of a worthless brat. Are you worried? Are you lost? What happened to that saint you once were? What a disappointment. What kind of petty, shitty stuff have you been pulled into? Now you’re full of contradictions. You’re an abomination uglier than even me. You’re not even worth killing.”

“Shut up.”

Sousuke pointed his gun at Gauron once again.

“And we were even two of a kind. What, are you trying to become some regular pushover? It makes me sick.”

“I told you to shut up.”

“Nooo, I’m gonna say it. Meeting up with Mithril and those school kids has made you into nothing. You’ve been seduced by those farty, super-weak, super-soft colleagues of yours, and have become boring. I said something was ‘getting on your nerves’ earlier, remember? That’s because of your friends. Humanism. It’s just word for describing the resentment of the weak. Now there’s no way to meet that murdering saint, Kashim, since you’ve given

in to those people around you. Do you understand? The weak are just parasites on the strong. They dangle sweet things like ‘friends’ and ‘future’ in front of them, then suck up all their strength all the way down to the marrow.”

Sousuke didn’t want to listen. But he couldn’t help but admit that what this man was saying was right. It was a rather frightening thing that only his bitter enemy could perfectly guess the reason that he was feeling the way he was right now.

However- he really had become weaker. Much weaker.
When did that happen?

Since he had met up with Mithril, Jindai High School and her.

“Tell me why. Is it really that much fun to hang around with those weak bastards?”

“Sh...”

From the middle of the bed in the darkness, something he couldn’t see seemed to be beckoning to him.

“Hey, answer me. I asked if it was really that much fun to hang around with those weak bastards, huh!?”

“I told you to shut up!”

Sousuke pulled the trigger.

The gunshot echoed throughout the room. The bullet hit Gauron’s pillow, letting up a little bit of smoke.

That was all.

“You don’t have the nerve to kill an enemy, huh?” Gauron said with a thin smile.

“Shut up...” was the only reply Sousuke could give in a faint voice. His face was hot, and he felt like he was suffocating. His back was drenched in sweat.

Just then, a large shadow moved from outside of the window.

It was Venom.

It probably had been hiding somewhere around that area. Its diamond shaped head peered in through the square window at Sousuke and Gauron.

“Fei Jau [Flying Condor]?” Gauron said.

“I’ll be leaving soon,” the Venom replied over its external speakers. It was the same voice as on the cell phone.

“I see. Keep going strong, then.”

“Farewell, Sir,” he said, and covering its right fist with its left hand and bowing, the Venom turned around and jumped away. The gray AS easily cleared the signboards and apartments, and vanished as it headed towards the heart of the city. The sudden gust of wind that it caused shook the windows.

“Fei Jau will probably meet up with Mithril and die. If not, then he’ll probably be killed by Amalgam’s execution unit.”

“Execution unit...?”

“The Commander is another angry bastard. Your ‘friends’ probably won’t be a match for him. The moment they meet up with him, he’ll annihilate ‘em. But that’s the way it goes, isn’t it?”

“...”

“I’m about to kick it,” Gauron said, looking up at the ceiling. There wasn’t an ounce of sorrow in his voice.

“I think I’ll go out with some traveling companions. That’s my style, after all. I ordered Fei Jau to go on a rampage until Hong Kong is a sea of fire. And as for Fei Hung- I ordered him to kill the ‘largest tumor’ that’s turned you into nothing.”

“The largest... tumor?”

Gauron gave him a final smile. It spread across his entire face, as if something had made him truly happy.

“The girl, Kashim. Have you not heard yet?”

“...!”

“I’ve heard the whole story. That cute sailor uniform figure of hers, completely crushed. She was tough and didn’t beg for her life. Her last words were ‘I’m sorry...’ I wonder who she was talking about? Ahh, it makes you wanna cry.”

“Yo... you’re lying.”

“Am I? I wanted to show you a picture of the girl’s dead body so I could see the look of utter despair on your face, but- ah well, I’ll get over it. Well? Kashim would be alright- isn’t the damage obvious? Tokyo~~ The girl~~ You can’t save her~~ Aww, pooor, little Kaname~~ She was such a nice girl, too~~”

Sousuke pointed his gun straight at Gauron. The gun wasn’t shaking at all.

“Gauron...!!”

“That’s right, kill me! Hate me!!”

He had no more hesitation. Sousuke aimed at Gauron’s chest and fired six rounds on end. The body shuddered, and fresh blood splattered on top of the sheets.

The medical heart monitor made a hollow ‘beep’ noise.

Gauron’s face was still drawn up in a smile, and he didn’t speak again.

His eyes were wide open, forever staring at Sousuke’s gun right in front of him.

“...it can’t be...”

There was a loud ringing in his head.

He didn’t know who or where he was. What did the dead body in front of him mean? That someone far away from here was dead?

Kaname- was she dead?

A deserted city. Alone in a gloomy room. At that moment, Sousuke was truly all alone in the world.

He heard an electronic sound.

Beep.....beep.....beep..be-be-be-bebe the electronic sound gradually grew louder. It wasn't the medical equipment. It was something else- from under the bed-

There was something giving off a warning from the empty corner at the head of the bed.

His body moved before any doubt could set in. He didn't even ask himself why he was trying to run at the last moment. Kicking off of the floor, he broke through the nearby window shoulder-first.

In the next instant, the room exploded.

The high power explosives under the bed blew up, and the blast shook the building. A torrent of flames gushed from the windows. The shock of the blast also broke the surrounding windows, and hundreds of pieces of remnants and debris spewed out over the empty street.

“...”

Sousuke groaned as he barely hung on to the signboard that had been sticking out in front of him. His hands slipped, and he fell on the sidewalk in front of the hardware store.

Above him, the fire violently raged on.

On the road, debris continued to rain down, rain down, rain down... Staggering, Sousuke got up and stared thick-headed at the bits and pieces of flaming building material.

Two men ran across the glass-covered street. Because they were wearing plain clothes Sousuke didn't recognize them at first, but they were two of Hunter's agents from the Intelligence Bureau.

“You look terrible, Sergeant,” said one of the agents, still looking up at the burning second floor of the apartment building.

“...why are you here?”

“We were asked by your Lt. Commander to follow you.”

“I see...”

“There’s a museum of Kowloon’s Castle ruins in this neighborhood. It looks like Venom was hiding in its courtyard. But then- all that’s pointless, now.”

From the middle of the city, the roar of artillery fire rang out. Venom was on the rampage. Then more gun fire. The South China Army’s AS had started battling it.

No. It wasn’t the South China Army. The sound of that muffled rapid fire was that of the very familiar Oerlikon Contraves-manufactured GEC-B rifle. The South China Army was not equipped with those rifles.

“Your colleagues’ M9s are fighting it.”

“What?”

“We ran out of time. It looks like they plan to fight the Venom head on.”

Reckless was the only thing he could think. How did they plan to oppose Venom without the Arbalest? It was almost suicidal.

“We just received a wireless communication. It seems the *Tuatha de Danaan* is sending the Arbalest.”

“What’d you say...?”

“I don’t know the details. We’re going to search for the things Venom left behind in its hiding place. Anyway, don’t move from this place. We were to make sure and tell you that,” one of the agents said, and they ran off in front of Sousuke.

Left behind, Sousuke just stood there in that very quiet place.

The Arbalest is coming...?

However, it wasn’t as if he could use that machine anymore. On no account did he want to see that AS which had screwed up his fate. He wanted to contact the *de Danaan* and say “It’s useless, so just stop,” but the bag that had his radio in it had blown up along with Gauron.

Gauron...

Before the explosion, if he had reacted just one second later, he probably would have died in that room. That man really had planned on taking others with him, hadn't he...?

No.

That wasn't it. He was testing him. In that moment, if he were so depressed he couldn't move, then there would be no point in living anymore. He had lost something vital, yet he still tried to go on. Gauron had wanted to ridicule that trait. "I will die. You suffer more" was what he wanted to say, wasn't it...?

More than likely.

By killing Kaname Chidori, Gauron had snatched away his hopes and dreams. If that man's plan had gone correctly, then this curse would be complete.

Kaname was dead.

His feelings didn't gush out at all.

But he felt that somewhere in his heart there was some kind of light, some kind of warmth that would not disappear. He had seen a lot of death up until now. And she had joined the rest in one page in his dark album.

There were no tears. Only a sense of melancholy that he had not felt in a long time.

That kind of thing.

Nothing would change.

The future, from the past.

A cold wind was blowing through the hole in his empty chest. He didn't care about himself. He didn't care about life. Even if someone were to die, it wouldn't cause one ripple in his heart.

There was a roar from the sky.

A narrow sky covered by numerous signboards. He could see a white bird coming from the south.

But it wasn't a bird. It was the Arbalest.

It was gliding along on wings of emergency expansion boosters straight towards Souseki. The boosters stopped firing. The wings detached and the parachute deployed.

It decelerated. It wasn't enough. There was a second parachute. It decelerated more.

The enormous white person separated from the parachutes, and dropped down through the numerous signboards onto the deserted street. The asphalt smashed into pieces and bounced off of the road along with the broken signboards. Nevertheless, without a break in momentum, the Arbalest changed posture, leaning forwards, and slammed into the ground towards Souseki's direction. The landing was messed up because of the cramped urban area.

“...”

The gigantic machine drew closer. The Arbalest passed through the area right beside Souseki, and crashed chest-first into the burning apartment building. The sudden gust of wind whipped Souseki's hair and work clothes around, but he didn't shrink back at all. The white AS collapsed onto its right side. The flaming pieces of debris that were scattered by the impact sprinkled down all around the AS.

It was a shameful landing. Terrible. Just like him. In the middle of the flames, the machine sank down and didn't move. Its two eyes stared blankly at Souseki.

We're the worst combination, is what the Arbalest's eyes started to say to Souseki.

I know you detest me. I hate you, too. That's why you should just leave me like this. In other words, I have absolutely no interest in doing anything, either. That's fine with you, isn't it?

At the very least, that's what Sousuke thought the Arbalest was saying to him.

No matter who dies, you don't care, do you? Whatever happens to Kurz or Mao isn't any of your business. Everyone will die sooner or later. Just like Kaname Chidori. Just like your comrades in Afghanistan. They'll all die. You will, too. That's how this world is. Just give up.

He felt like it was ridiculing him. He felt like it was making fun of him. He felt as if he were being scorned by this simple machine.

Nevertheless, he didn't get angry.

"...that's right," Sousuke muttered in a cold and hollow voice. "Just stay there and rot like that."

It didn't matter. He didn't care. Whatever happened had nothing to do with him.

He was about to leave, when...

In Japanese, a girl's voice said:

"So are you just going to stand there like an idiot muttering nonsense?"

He turned around-

In the middle of the road stood Kaname Chidori.

He rubbed his eyes.

Kaname was wearing her Jindai High School sailor uniform. She had a Boston bag hanging from her right shoulder. From the top of her head to the tip of her toes, she was the Kaname he knew so well. No- on second glance, there were white bandages here and there on her slender legs. She was wearing a supporter on her right knee, and a band aid on her chin.

"Wha..."

"It's not 'Wha-'" the girl, who could be none other than Kaname Chidori, said with a frown.



He turns around- and Kaname Chidori is standing there. She throws her Boston bag, and storms at him in her usual way.

“...Chidori?”

He wasn’t hallucinating. She was alive.

But why in the world was she here? How did she get here?

Faltering, he walked towards her.

“Chidori... you were... alright?”

“More or less.”

“...I thought... you were dead. Chido-” Suddenly, the Boston bag hit the side of his face with a “BOFF!!”, and Souseki staggered over.

“...wha?”

“It’s not ‘Wha-’, is it!?” Kaname yelled out at the top of her lungs.

“I went through major trouble to get here, so what’s with ‘I thought you were dead’!? Until just a second ago I thought I’d run into your arms when I saw you- that’s how I thought I’d feel. But

that's completely gone now. What are you doing!? Well? What do you have to say for yourself!?"

"No, wait a minute. It's really complica-"

"Oh, shut up!!" She punched him in the jaw.

"Gah..."

"Does it hurt? It hurts, right? That's the pain in my heart. And this...!?"

She karate chopped him on the back of the neck.

"Goff..."

"That's the pain in my body! And this!?"

Kaname smiled, and then knee-kicked Souseki in the stomach.

"Guho..."

"That's for me! For the pain in my soul!?"

In a Bruce Lee fashion, Kaname jabbed her fists into Souseki, who had fallen to his knees. She was shaking.

"What in the world... what's going on?"

"The Intelligence Bureau person. You know, the one called 'Wraith'?" she said with a snort. "I told him if he didn't want me revealing that he screwed up and almost let me die that he would bring me here. That was how I threatened him. After they showed the AS that that guy Gauron had before on the news, it all clicked. I knew you would definitely come here."

"Bu... but, this place is right on the front line of the war. It's dangerous."

"I know that. And since there's almost no airmail, it took an entire day to get here. It was really troublesome!?"

"But, why..." Why was she here? Even facing this kind of danger. Souseki couldn't imagine her reasoning.

"That's-"

Kaname looked up at him, then averted her eyes. Like a child placing blame on someone else, she said, “Because. If that was the end... then...”

“Huh...?”

“Never mind. Wh, when you just... up and quit school and left, it really ticked me off! I was going to search everywhere and then drag you home by the scruff of your neck! Because I-”

Kaname clenched her fists tight as if she were trying to say something really important.

“I’m-”

“You are?”

She drummed her fists against her head to get with it- but finally said:

“I’m- because I’m the class representative.”

“...?”

Sousuke just looked at her blankly. Kaname sighed deeply in front of him and said “I knew it. Just one day passes and I lose my will...” and some other nonsense he didn’t understand.

“What do you mean?”

“Shut up! A... anyway, what about you!? Why are you just hanging around out here!? There’s a bad guy destroying the city, isn’t there!?”

“No, it’s just-”

“It’s just what? You weren’t just standing there looking at that AS. What was with that face earlier? It was just like the old you.”

“What...?”

“Back when I still called you ‘Sagara’. Kinda like... you didn’t care what happened to you, or something. Very cold. And sad, very sad... ahh, what am I saying? In other words? Well...” she stammered, then falteringly continued. “To tell the truth, earlier I

heard Mao over the radio. She said that you were just about fed up. She said that you had lost your will, or that ‘I’ll do it!’ spirit, or whatever...”

“...”

“But you know? When everyone’s in trouble, you’re the one who can’t just stand by and watch, right?”

“I am...?”

“Yes.”

“But, Chidori. I... I deserted you... Even though you had no one else to rely on, I walked out on you. All because I was obeying some petty ‘order’. That kind of me, you-”

“Well, it’s alright now. I was able to see you again like this, so... I understand. You couldn’t bring yourself to tell me, right?”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Well... you are a coward, after all.”

“A coward...”

“That’s right. A bi-g coward. But you’re strong. And very kind. You’re pretty hopeless, but you manage. That’s... that’s what I think the real Sousuke is.”

Kaname gave an embarrassed smile. It was almost a magical smile.

“Well... am I right?”

Those extremely clumsy words lifted his curse. Almost surprisingly so. Completely. He felt as if the clotted, discolored, stagnate pressure inside his body was being washed away by spring water.

Coward.

Gauron had said he was “strong”.

However, that- that was wrong. He was weak. And on top of being weak, he had been only trying to become strong. Not being able to be a coward had made him need to become strong-

that was the only reason. The burden of having something to protect. His former self hadn't known what that was.

He was a weak being, full of contradictions.

He wasn't a hero. He couldn't save the world, either. Only he was just one insignificant man who may or may not be able to save some of the people around him.

Was such a man really sufficient to be a soldier?

He was.

There were such times. However ironic, he had been given those opportunities many times.

And right now was one of those times.

Beyond those flames, his friends were waiting.

His life up until now- wasn't he holding the means to fight against a dark and depressing fate? And wasn't that means fighting itself?

Yes, it was.

Sousuke drooped his head down a little, then hesitating, he slowly said:

“Chidori... I-”

Kaname then kicked him down, and Sousuke fell face-first on the Hong Kong ground.

“What was-”

“It's nooooot ‘Chidori...I-’!!” Kaname blew up at him at the top of her lungs.

“No, it's just...”

“Get off it!! There isn't any time, right!? Aren't you in danger of failing World History!? Tomorrow, fifth period! You can still make it! So hurry up and-” She pointed at the war in the center of town. “-settle things!!”

She then pointed at the Arbalest, which was still lying on its side.

The two eyes of the white AS were now saying this to Sousuke.

So, what are you going to do?



It was a dangerous game resembling that of a wild animal hunt. The six M9s of Clouseau's force were persistently surrounding and pursuing the Venom, which had just destroyed one of the South China Army's M6s.

In the first 30 seconds after the battle began, Corporal Spake's M9 was shot by Venom. Because of the complex town area and numerous signboards, he had misjudged the path of retreat and the enemy was able to press closer. Spake's unit was hit by the Lambda Driver's shock wave and completely silenced. In the confusion of battle, there was no time to confirm how much damage was done or whether the pilot was dead or alive.

“Uruz 1, he's coming your way!” Mao warned Clouseau sharply.

“I saw him. Just now-”

Bang! was the sound of a point-blank explosion. The enemy unit had thrown its anti-tank dagger at Clouseau.

“Uruz 1!?”

The Venom was closing in from across the flames of the explosion. Turning around to face high-rise apartments behind him, Clouseau fired his rifle. The white bullets repelled, shooting off in every direction, and building material rained down all over the place.

The Venom drew in and threw out its fists. Clouseau narrowly stooped down. The fist cutting through the air, as well as

the space distortion surrounding the fist, smashed the M9's right shoulder into the building behind it and blew it away.

There was a violent impact, and the high-pitched shriek of atmosphere. For a moment, Clouseau lost consciousness.

“...!”

Clouseau skillfully recovered his posture, while at the same time releasing a roundhouse kick like a whirlwind. The heel of the M9 caught the Venom upside the head, causing it to stagger a little. Then a knee kick. Then an elbow strike. Immediately, Clouseau tried to take out his monomolecular cutter from his hip, but- the right arm didn't respond. No, he was missing the right arm from the shoulder down.

“!”

The Venom approached mercilessly and raised his arm up in a knife hand position.

“Don't move, Uruz 1,” said Kurz. Sniping from a long distance, he shot Venom. The enemy AS jumped up as if it had been hit in the side. In that instant, Clouseau's M9 jumped up and quickly got away. An ordinary pilot probably would not have been able to escape.

“He's bounced back again. Damn bastard's like a cockroach!”

“You're a lifesaver, Uruz 6.”

“That makes two times, Lieutenant.”

“This is Perth 1 to Uruz 1. Damage report,” Kalinin, who had taken command from the helicopter in the sky, said over the radio.

“This... is Uruz 1. Right arm is completely useless. Firearms are lost. Pilot has light injuries. The cooling system is also in bad shape. It doesn't look like it can move much longer.”

His right arm hurt here and there, almost as if it were on fire. It was similar to the way a burn felt. Was this also the effect of the Lambda Driver...?

“Understood. Fall back three blocks south. There’s a three-forked road. Go southwest and lure him to Area 11A,” Kalinin said composedly, giving out precise directions.

“Uruz 1, roger that.”

“Uruz 6, you move west. I sent you the date just now. Establish a firing zone at the intersection at the top of the map and then wait. When the Venom jumps out, fire up to one magazine and escape south.”

“Uruz 6 here, roger.”

“Perth 1 to everyone. I have received a communication from the Intelligence Bureau. Uruz 8 is alive for now. The recovery operation is underway. 300 seconds have passed since the battle started. Hold out another 100 seconds. The current is changing.”

Clouseau judged that Lt. Commander Kalinin’s surmise was pretty accurate. They were receiving some hard blows, but Venom’s movements were slowing down compared to how they were at the onset. Problems with energy, problems with the pilot—they didn’t know about those. But there was no mistaking that the enemy was getting tired.

They could do it. They were still far from relaxing, but if they didn’t have any trouble, they would soon be able to surround and destroy Venom. Their tactics were working.

But first, they had to get away from Venom.

Taking small hops, Clouseau’s unit made its way through the confined street. The AI was reporting the systems’ damage. The machine wouldn’t hold out much longer.

“This is Uruz 1. I’ve passed through the three-forked road. I’m almost to the intersection...?”

Even though Venom was chasing after him, Clouseau came to a halt right before the wide intersection.

“What is it, Uruz 1?”

“Impossible...”

“Uruz 1, explain the situation.”

“There are-”

The intersection where Clouseau was standing. In the front corner- on top of the roof of a shopping center with the neon lights out, there were five shadows.

Five ASes- five Venoms.



The five Venoms, each with a single red eye, were looking down at Clouseau. They were all dark red in color.

“There are... five Venoms.”

“What?”

“This is Uruz 6. I can see them. It’s true... there are five,” Kurz said rigidly.

The first Venom, which was coming closer to Clouseau, also stopped before the intersection. The gaze of the red sensor wasn’t looking at Clouseau’s unit, but was turned straight towards the five new ASes.

“You’ve been on a rather flashy rampage, haven’t you, Fei Jau?” said one of the ASes over its external speakers. It was the voice of a man, but it was high-pitched, almost like that of a raven. It didn’t seem to pay any attention to the presence of Clouseau.

“You stole a ‘class m’ from the organization, and then deliberately caused this kind of uproar in an outside area. Have you gone mad?”

“We’ve both gone mad, Mister Kalium^{*7},” the gray Venom spoke for the first time.

“Even though my brother and I have lost our home town, it seems Amalgam was still involved. Since we were able to scare the hell out of you guys, I’m satisfied.”

“Hmph... your brother, huh? Shall I let you meet him here?”

“What?”

The dark Venom abruptly held out its right hand. If its fingers were the same size as a human’s, then the lump that it was holding between them would have been about the size of a small egg.

It was a human head.

“Uh...!”

“It was something given to me by Mister Silver. It seems he wanted him buried, but I won’t allow it. It’s appropriate for the corpses of traitors to lay exposed in a filthy street corner,” he said, and the red Venom simply threw the head away. The head made a very high arc, and fell on the other side of a far building.

“Aww, how pathetic. U-hu-hu-hu.”

“You bastards...!”

The gray Venom jumped over Clouseau’s M9, straight at the five ASes.

“And you’re pathetic, too.”

In the next instant, all five ASes moved at the same time.

A long spear, long sword, large knife- they attacked the gray Venom simultaneously with their respective weapons. The surrounding air violently distorted, and the outer wall of the shopping center was shattered into pieces.

“Uh...”

Clouseau’s AS jumped back from the area. Small bits of debris hit his armor, and a dry sound reverberated. The smoke cleared. On top of the crumbling shopping center, the gray Venom had been altogether skewered- like a hedgehog.

The five ASes threw away the Venom. The gray AS fell to the street, scattering smoke and sparks, and didn’t move after that.

The enemy AS that had given them that much trouble was taken care of in one moment.

Were all five of these machines equipped with Lambda Drivers...?

“Ben!?”

Mao’s M9 jumped over to try and help Clouseau up.

“Did you not hear, Uruz 1? The operation has been aborted. Retreat,” Kalinin ordered.

“I can’t. I’m out of power... I can only do minimum maneuvers.”

“Abandon the unit. Escape quickly-”

“By the way, you guys,” the middle Venom said to Clouseau and Mao. The way he spoke sounded as if he just now noticed their presence.

“You’re Mithril’s soldiers, aren’t you?”

“...”

“We really don’t have any special business with you, but... just wasting one AS wasn’t enough. This’ll be perfect combat training. You don’t mind if we kill you, right?”

“What...?”

It would probably only take a moment for the five units to jump over from where they were. There wasn’t enough time to open the hatch, get out of the AS, and have Mao carry him.

“I’ll say it again. This is Perth 1 to all units. Retreat now. Quickly.”

“Never mind. Get out of here, Mao!” Clouseau screamed.

“I ca-”

“Hurry!”

On the roof of the shopping center that was now a mountain of rubble, the five ASes took up their stances with leisurely movements. Lying each of their weapons down, they prepared to jump.

“Have you prepared yourselves? Then, farewe-”

Immediately after, a shell from somewhere hit the lead AS in the right shoulder. The red armor ripped, smoke poured out and the machine was blown backwards.

The Venom, which should have been equipped with a Lambda Driver, had been shot.

“Wha...?”

The five Venoms looked towards the roof of the building diagonal to the intersection.

“Who shot that? Weber?”

“No, I didn’t shoot anything just now. But... does this mean that he’s finally shown up?”

“Huh?”

Kurz’s voice then sounded as if he were happy about something in the middle of this predicament.

“Yep... you and your timing. This is too rich, huh?- Sousuke!”

“It would seem so,” said the voice of that particular Sergeant.

Opposite of the five machines, on the roof of the tallest building, stood one AS. Its white figure was silhouetted against the glow of the dim streetlights.

“This is Uruz 7 to everyone-”

With his favorite shot cannon in hand, the Arbalest glared at the five Venoms.

“Sorry to make you wait. Leave everything else to me.”

◆ ◆ ◆

The AS's power rose.

It went from “cruise” to “military”. And then to “maximum”.

Inside the cockpit as the roaring sound rose, Sousuke muttered, “It was operating just now, wasn’t it?”

<Affirmative, Sergeant. The Lambda Driver was functioning.> Al answered.

“...sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. What a completely unreliable device.”

<I agree.>

“It seems you’re better at jokes than I am.”

<Affirmative.>

“You’re spiteful, huh?”

He received a short message from Kalinin.

“This is Perth 1 to Uruz 7. Are you back in your stride?”

“Affirmative, Perth 1.”

“Then have at it.”

“Roger.”

On the monitor, he could see the Venoms looking up at him.

Five opponents. Could he do it? They weren’t old Savages.

They were Venoms, one of which had given them enough trouble.

He could do it.

He believed that.

This machine and me. We're the worst combination- but even still, we've made it this far. There's no use in complaining about compatibility issues.

I'll do something about the bad guys.

That's this machine. And that's me, right, Chidori?

He took a deep breath.

He gripped the handles with both hands, and lightly toggled them. The operator controls responded, and the machine powerfully stretched out its arms to the right and left.

“Let's go...!”

<Roger!>

He jumped off of the roof's edge. The Arbalest fell through the empty sky as if it were casually riding on the wind.

With his head turned towards the ground, he pointed his gun up at the five ASes above him. First the right side-

He fired.

The armor piercing ammunition discharged from his shot cannon had a lasting trail of dazzling iridescent light, and pierced the torso of one of the Venoms. Fragments of armor and parts spewed straight from its back.

That was just one hit.

Using the recoil from the cannon, Sousuke changed his body position 180 degrees. He landed with his legs on the ground. The asphalt shattered, and the shock absorbers vented from the full-body propulsion system.

“Wh-what the hell...!?”

Surprised that his subordinates were getting crushed all too easily, the commanding machine ordered the others to deploy.

The Venoms separated right and left, drew out their heavy weapons and fired. Sousuke stepped lightly and turned aside, blowing up a whirlwind. A lot of shells danced all around him.

He jumped. Clearing the barrage of bullets, he landed on top of a signboard projecting out into the street. Despite the Arbalest's weight of nine tons, the signboard didn't break for whatever reason, thankfully.

To the right. To the left. The Arbalest was doing somersaults in midair to dodge their fire. Then one Venom got in perfect position.

Fire!

The enemy AS crossed its arms in front of it, trying to protect itself from the shot cannon's bullet. The iridescent shell completely penetrated the Venom's arms. The torso was ripped right in half, and the red AS was flung into the road.

“That's two!”

<Warning! Enemy approaching at four o'clock.>

The alarm sounded. Kicking off the wall of a high-rise apartment building, the Venom was approaching from behind him and to the left. It had a Halberd-brand monomolecular cutter raised overhead, and was coming straight at him.

There was a flash. Sousuke evaded.

Taking the monomolecular cutter from his hip with his right hand, he cut through the enemy's Halberd. On the return strike, he cut the Venom diagonally from the shoulder down to the waist. Numerous sparks gushed forth, and the enemy machine fell to its knees on the road. Thrusting the shot cannon in his right hand into the Venom, Sousuke fired. Flames in a vivid array of colors shot out, and the Venom exploded.

<That's three!>

“Don't say it before me!”

The fourth Venom fired blindly as it jumped from a building overhead. In that time, Sousuke had the Arbalest easily do a front flip.

While he was flipping, he fired.

Because he shot from such an unreasonable position, the bullet only hit the enemy's left shoulder.

Rising up by a natural jack knife maneuver, the Arbalest braced both legs, aimed at the enemy as it touched down, and fired again.

It was a direct hit in the middle of the chest. The Venom was thrown backwards and blown away.

“That's four...!”

<That's four!>

Sousuke and Al said at the same time.

As if creeping along the ground, the Arbalest ran through the deserted main street. The smell of the wind that the Arbalest felt also permeated into Sousuke's skin.

It was strange.

A machine that moved with his thoughts- with his spirit.

The perfect sense of unity that pilots occasionally feel.

You could call it a feeling of omnipotence. He was becoming as he was thinking right now, with an overwhelming- an entirely overwhelming sense of power. This machine was Sousuke's body. This body that he hated so much wasn't so bad- it wasn't a piece of garbage- was how he felt.

No, that was out of the question. How light this body felt. It was a feeling as if he could fly anywhere.

That's right. No matter what, he could do it. And no one could stop him!

He turned the corner and saw the lead Venom. It was using an unlucky South China Army M6 that had unexpectedly passed by as a shield, and shot at the Arbalest with its large size Gatling gun.

It blew off the signboard overhead, and the Arbalest jumped into the sky. It was a large, large jump, exceeding every kind of equipment limitation. There was so much distance in the jump that he cleared straight over the lead Venom.

“Eh...!?”

He landed behind him, and the lead Venom tried to point its Gatling gun at Sousuke in a panic. There was a flash from the left hand. The Arbalest’s monomolecular cutter had cut the Gatling gun right in two.

“S... stay away!!”

Throwing away the Gatling gun, the last Venom thrust a handgun into the cockpit of the M6.

“Will you kill the pilot!? Stay back! Don’t move!”

“H-help me...”

The M6’s control system seems to be destroyed, so it can’t move either of its arms. What should I do? No, I’ll use it. That blow that Mao received on Berildaobu Island.

Right now, we can definitely do it.

“M... Mithril’s Lambda Driver is incomplete, isn’t it!? No, it can’t be, that strength- who are you!? What in the world are you!?”

“You wanna know...?”

Sousuke tossed the shot cannon aside.

Who was he? That’s right. He was-

“Jindai High School, second year, class four. Roll-call number 41. Second term garbage duty-”

And iridescent haze rose up from his right fist. A strange noise screamed.

“-Sousuke Sagara!!”

“U-uwaaaaaaa...!!”

The Venom aimed its handgun at Sousuke and fired.
Sousuke- the Arbalest easily deflected the bullets, and drove its fist directly into the M6 that the Venom was using to shield itself.

The earth shook. The road whined.



It sounded like the roar of hundreds of wild animals. The Arbalest released a power so fierce it would twist gravity from its fist. That power completely disregarded the M6, passing through it, and bared its brutal fangs to the enemy behind it.

In an instant, the Venom's entire body was shattered. The armor, frame, electromagnetic muscle and such, were blown to pieces. The fragments of the Venom, along with the broken glass from the surrounding buildings, then scattered all over the road.

The M6 that had been used as a shield was completely undamaged. It fell down heavily on its hips and looked up dumbfounded at the Arbalest.

“Go,” Sousuke said as the Arbalest pointed to the other side of the street. The M6 mumbled something, then hastily ran off in that direction.

Shortly after, Al said:

<All targets confirmed destroyed. Shall I switch to search mode?>

“Go ahead.”

<Roger.>

Flipping the switch on the handle, Sousuke opened up communications line.

“...this is Uruz 7 to everyone. All of the Venoms have been destroyed.”

“-this is Perth 1. Did you say... all of them?”

“Affirmative. From here, I will be returning to TDD-1-”
Sousuke started to say, but then he reconsidered.

The trouble in this city was cleared up now. Now all that was left was to be transported back to the *Tuatha de Danaan* by the transport helicopter. It was the same procedure as always.

But, that kind of procedure...

Even though he was thinking this, he needed a little courage in his report.

“Correction... this is Uruz 7. All enemy units have been destroyed. I will move on to my next mission from here. I will be leaving the Arbalest here, so please recover it. If you don’t hurry, the South China Army will take it.”

“Huh? Uruz 7, I don’t understand. What’s this ‘next mission’ you’re talking about-”

“End communication!”

Sousuke ended the transmission, had the Arbalest kneel down, and operated the open hatch switch underneath the handle. The overhead hatch slowly opened due to the power of compressed air.

<Sergeant. You are not carrying out the end-of-operations approval procedures?> Al asked.

“It’s okay. The operation is already over.”

<Roger... I have a question.>

“What is it?”

<From every viewpoint, this battle yielded the best results so far. To phrase it in a human term- they were surprising. If it is possible, can you tell me the reason why?>

“...the problem is resolved. Something like that.”

<Your problem?>

“No,” Sousuke said, patting the control panel, “Our problem.”

<I do not understand your reply.>

“Think about it, partner.”

Without saying anything else, Sousuke got out of the Arbalest’s cockpit. Jumping down onto the road, he ran through the middle of the burning enemy AS debris in a big hurry.

Because someone was waiting for him.

And he could go anywhere.



When Teletha Testarossa heard the report that Sousuke Sagara had left the Arbalest behind and disappeared, she thought, *Aah, I knew it.*

When they asked Gavin Hunter from the Intelligence Department, he said that he wasn't able to get in contact with Kaname Chidori after that. According to Hunter's Intelligence Department afterwards, the surveillance cameras at the Kai Tak International Airport caught sight of a boy and a girl that looked a lot like them.

The fake passport he had been given during his reconnaissance mission was effective.

The half-damaged M9, Corporal Spake and the Arbalest were safely recovered. The subordinates appeased the South China Army with the process; but even though they did it secretly, they still ran into problems here and there. There were also a few difficulties in returning to the *Tuatha de Danaan*.

But all of the problems worked out somehow.

Most of the Venoms' wreckage was recovered, the North and South Armies took up arms in hazardous places, and the refugee citizens returned back to the center area of Hong Kong.

It wasn't until the day after the *Tuatha de Danaan* had left the coast of Hong Kong that they found out Sousuke Sagara's whereabouts. There was a communication from the man himself, as well as information via the Intelligence Department.

His communication was sent from a high school in Tokyo.

Mardukas was so furious he was beside himself, and told him "Return to Merida Island immediately."

Sousuke said as politely as possible, “I am afraid that I cannot comply with your order, Sir. At least, not until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Why not?” Tessa asked. Sousuke calmly replied:

“Because I have Kanji class on Saturday, and I can’t afford to miss it.”

When Kalinin, who was standing beside Tessa, heard this, he did something which was very rare for him- he laughed out loud.



October 25th, 11:21 (Pacific Standard Time)
Mithril's Merida Island Base
Meeting Room 1

Mithril's executive officers were gathered in Meeting Room 1 on the Merida Island Base.

As usual, they were three-dimensional images.

Next to Tessa's seat stood Mardukas, Kalinin, and Sousuke. Sousuke had only arrived from Tokyo thirty minutes earlier.

“I have never been as angry as I am right now,” said the President of the Intelligence Department, General Amit, in a low voice.

“But he is the only one who can use the Arbalest,” Tessa said. General Amit snorted.

“You should be quiet, Captain. A Sergeant- an immature, low-ranking officer, is opposing our decisions. Not only that, but he's doing it with threats. Did you think that we would approve of this kind of behavior?”

“I am not threatening anyone, Sir. Nor am I opposing you,” Sousuke said, standing at attention. “What I am proposing is a

change in the contract agreement. If this proposal is not agreeable to you, I will pay the fine for breaching my contract and leave the force.”

“What about you leaking classified information?”

“If that is your worry, then do as you must. Unfortunately-I have no intentions of being confined to strict secrecy.”

Amit’s three-dimensional figure leaned forward, and looked Sousuke square in the face.

“That’s big talk there, Sergeant. Do you think you’ll be able to get what you want by making an enemy out of me...?”

“Then it is as you wish, General, Sir. Does that mean that you don’t think that you can handle me?”

“What did you say...?”

“Listen, General-” Sousuke continued, completely unperturbed and in a more disrespectful tone, “I don’t remember selling my soul to Mithril. If what you guys are doing is strange, then allow me to do what I feel is right. That’s all I want. I’ll continue piloting the Arbalest. I’ll risk my life for my colleagues. I will also continue going to that school. Everything will be like it was before. But you don’t have to pay me for my time in Tokyo. Do you have any complaints about that?”

“Watch your language, Sergeant!”

“Sergeant? I’m just an ordinary mercenary. What do you say to a migrant? They don’t understand something like rank. That’s something you say to a pet dog.”

“Tch...!!”

“Wa... wa ha ha ha...”

When he heard this exchange, Sir Mallory, who was wearing his eyeglass as usual, could no longer keep silent and burst out laughing.

“Earl?”

“Hah hah ha... you lose, General.

“‘The SRT soldiers can’t be tamed.’ Now who was the one who said that the other day right in this very place?”

“That was...”

“That’s right. You did, General. That troublesome SRT soldier is saying that he will do what he’s been doing up till now for half the pay. We should be thanking him, not getting unreasonably angry at him. Don’t you agree, Admiral?”

“Well... that may be. But it’s not something we can just go around announcing.”

“Dr. Painrose?”

Sir Mallory looked over to the Head of Research, Doctor Painrose.

“I’m looking over the report I received from Lemming. Sergeant Sagara will be indispensable regarding our research on the Lambda Driver after this.”

“Very well. Are there any objections?” Sir Mallory asked the other executives around the table. None of them said anything.

“Then that’s how it will be, Captain Testarossa. It seems you have your hands full with peculiar subordinates. You have my sympathy.”

“Don’t. My subordinates are the best,” Tessa said positively, and Sir Mallory smiled.

“Hmph. Well, I can’t say that you guys in the West Pacific Fleet don’t know your stuff. I have high expectations from you guys from now on.”

“Yes, Sir. We are honored.”

“Also, Sergeant- you said you’re name was... Sousuke Sagara, right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I’ll make sure to remember it. This discussion is over. Well, then, ladies and gentlemen, take care.”



When the online meeting ended, Mardukas immediately turned to Sousuke.

“First of all, that was a hassle,” he said, “however, Sergeant... don’t add to my worries. When you started speaking so bluntly, I broke out into a cold sweat!!”

“Yes, Sir... I apologize, Commander,” Sousuke said, bowing obediently. Mardukas sighed and left the meeting room.

Kalinin spoke to him next.

“Are you satisfied?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You have the face of a man, now.”

“Sir...?”

“I’ll treat you later. I’ll listen to Gauron’s story then.”

“...thank you.”

He patted Sousuke on the back with his briefcase then left the meeting room. His attitude was different from usual.

Now only Sousuke and Tessa were left in the empty meeting room.

“Umm...” Tessa, who was dressed in a khaki uniform, started hesitantly, “I haven’t said it yet, but... I’m sorry for the other day.”

“The other day?”

“You know... before the Hong Kong mission, when you and I had the big fight?”

“...oh. No,” Sousuke answered ambiguously, without knowing what kind of answer to give. “I’m also sorry.”

“It’s okay. I... I was jealous of Kaname. So I blew up at you...”

“Captain...”

“I was just weak. Because of you. But I didn’t think it was acceptable to say it, of course. I had to be able to make a fine distinction, I thought. But, because of that...”

Looking downcast, Tessa looked into Sousuke’s eyes.

“We’re still friends, right...?” she asked in a sad voice.

Just then, Sousuke finally understood.

He didn’t understand everything behind why she was crying back then or why she had flown into such a rage, but he did realize the mistake he had been making up until now.

Teletha Testarossa was not a goddess.

She wasn’t an omnipotent being, a saint or even an idol.

There were times she would occasionally say irrational things, he would hurt her by saying something impulsively, she would resent him, then cry. It wasn’t any different with the students at his high school and Kaname Chidori. When he thought about it, there had been many times like that up till now. So why hadn’t he noticed it?

“Of course we are, Captain,” he said when he realized it. “If- if you recognize me as a friend, then would you permit me to speak freely for a moment?

“Eh...? U.. of course...”

Tessa braced herself a little bit.

So, tell her, Sousuke Sagara. If she were a friend at school, how would I talk to her right now? I should know. If she were a friend, how would I say it?

After taking a deep breath, Sousuke said:

“Tessa... I’m sorry for everything.”

When he said this, he was far more nervous than when he had talked down to General Amit.

“Huh...”

“I... I’m always causing problems for you. You’re a wonderful girl. If I were in your place, I probably would have folded under the pressure a long time ago. So... I really respect you. You’re more than my superior officer to me. You’re a very important friend. If you have any problems... please tell me about them whenever you feel like it. I’ll support you.”

Tessa just stared at him blankly for a while after.

After he had said it, Sousuke was then astonished by what he had just done.

Am I stupid? Someone like me. To someone like her. Someone of her importance. And I just spoke so rashly. No matter what, that was way out of line, wasn’t it...? Ahh, damn it.

“...e-excuse me. But it was my true feelings. Well, then... I will be leaving.”

Without being able to look at her face after that, Sousuke ran out of the room.

Sousuke didn’t hear most of the strange clapping, someone dancing around in high heels and the racket of a chair falling over from behind him.

Epilogue

After she was aware of how Sousuke's situation had worsened, the fluke of keeping the letter of resignation in her desk was Eri Kagurazaka's way of doing things.

"...I don't know what happened," she said in the staff room, "but you know because of your irresponsibility, I ended up covering for you as well?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry," Sousuke answered, standing at attention.

"Because you're a serious young man, I've done it up till now."

"Yes, ma'am. That's been very kind of you."

"If you understand, then change your behavior a little bit. The incident with the car and such. Why... why do you always, always cause these kinds of problems? Really, with that way you are- ah, ahhhhh!!" Eri screamed when Sousuke suddenly pushed her over.

"Wh-what!? What are you doing!? Don't, Sagara, people are looking...!?"

"There's a laser sight aimed at you, Mrs. Kagurazaka! Don't move!!"

There was Eri, laying on the floor, baffled. There was Sousuke, who had taken out his gun and was cautiously looking around the area. And then there was Kaname, who came flying in yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Sousuke!! Are you at it again!?"

"No, there was a laser sight-"

"Shut up!!"

Kaname then kicked and punched Sousuke, flinging him into the floor.



In the quadruple magnification scope, Uruz 7 struggled wildly.

It was a pathetic sight. This was the man they said argued down the frightening President of the Intelligence Department, General Amit?

“Hmph...” Wraith snorted as he ^{*2} put away his Belgian-made submachine gun with laser sight attached. Using his specialty of disguise, he was impersonating a housewife who looked like someone from around the neighborhood. He was able to see various areas of Jindai High School from a building several hundred meters away.

He looked at the sky.

Black clouds were slowly covering the sky overhead.

He was listening to the weather report. It was supposed to rain soon, as well as turn very cold tonight.

He should have gone ahead and bought a hot pack from the neighborhood convenience store. With her consent, Kaname continued to wear the transmitter, but that didn’t mean he could take his eyes off of her. No matter how imperfect the preparations at the Tokyo Intelligence Bureau-

Why do I have to get drenched all the time...?

Wraith thought, becoming depressed. There was a little bit of roof over there. However, he had to respond unconditionally if Kaname Chidori called from now on. You see, he owed her because of his weakness. There was no helping it.

Wraith looked through his binoculars. In the far away staff room, Uruz 7 and Kaname Chidori were bowing apologetically to the homeroom teacher.

Serves them right. They should have to feel at least a little of my suffering.

...he thought this, but it didn't do anything for the cold that was biting at his body. After a small sneeze, Wraith pulled the coat he was wearing closer to himself.

“Good grief...” he mumbled in a dismal voice.



“Right now! Why did you do that!?” Kaname Chidori yelled out as they left the staff room. “After everything she and I did for you, what were you thinking? Don't tell me you thought that was reasonable!?”

“No, I really wasn't-”

“Shut up! You... you haven't made one bit of progress at all! Why don't you think about what you're doing for a second!? You always, always, ALWAYS...!”

Kaname took a stack of copy paper from out of nowhere and threw it up in the air.

“Wait, Chidori-”

“You always, always...”

Ordinarily, she would be burning mad, but for some reason this time, the hand in which Kaname gripped the paper fell limply to her side.

“Always... uh.”

She released the paper and mumbled in a cracked voice, “Always... this... this is like always, isn't it...?”

“...?”

“Finally... it finally feels like usual... uh.”

Unable to control herself any longer, she pushed her forehead into Sousuke’s chest.

“It’s finally back to the way it was... the way it always is...”

“...Chidori?”

“Leaving me like that... why did you do it? I can’t forgive you.”

She had been composed since the time they left Hong Kong. Her sudden change just now took Sousuke completely by surprise.

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s not ‘I’m sorry.’ Idiot... stupid stupid stupid. I can’t forgive you, okay? I really can’t... absolutely can’t forgive you...!”

Kaname weakly hit Sousuke’s chest over and over again.

“I was scared. I was really scared. I hated it, okay!? Don’t do it again, ever!”

The students coming and going through the corridor watched the two with great interest.

“It’s alright now. Um... Chidori? Can we possibly go to another place...?”

“No... I can’t do that...”

Kaname sobbed without any shame or embarrassment, clinging to Sousuke’s chest. Her shoulders shook like a little girl’s. Sousuke was panicked, and didn’t know what else do except pat her on the back soothingly.

Just then, Kyouko Tokiwa, who had been passing by, plowed her way through the crowd of people, poking her head through by chance.

“What is it, what’s going on? ...ah, Kaname?”

“To-Tokiwa...?”

“Hey, are you alright? Hey, Kaname! Are you hurt?”

“U- u... Kyouko... Sousuke is... Sousuke is...”

Kaname blew her nose on a handkerchief. She didn't manage to say anymore after that.

“Sagara!? What did you do to Kaname!? Did you tell her something like ‘There’s a bomb’ or do something outrageous again!?”

“What? No, it’s just-”

“I think making up excuses is pathetic! Apologize to Kaname, right now!”

Kyouko put her hands on her hips and scowled at Sousuke.

“That’s right, that’s right!”

“Really, already on the day you come back...!”

“Poor Chidori!”

Everyone in the gallery around them nodded in agreement, vehemently criticizing Sousuke.

“It’s just that... well...”

“Well, what!?” everyone said in unison.

He was definitely back. But when he really, really thought about it-

His problems at school hadn’t changed after all, had they...?

“...no. I’m sorry.”

While wondering about her irrational sadness, Sousuke bowed deeply, and everyone there said “That’s better,” in approval.

But it was still a long time until Kaname stopped crying.

The End

Translator's Notes:

1. Kanji are the Chinese characters used in Japanese, but the meanings and readings from Chinese to Japanese are not the same.
2. As I have stated before, I don't know Chinese, so these Cantonese romanizations may not be correct. Sorry.
3. Here we have something rather tricky – this is a play on the name Yang Shangkun (the President of the People's Republic of China from 1988 to 1993), because the Chinese characters used for his name have the same pronunciation in Japanese, but one of the characters is not the same. A little hard to explain, but I hope I get the point across.
4. This is also a play on the name of another character in Chinese History, Zhang Heng (a Chinese astronomer, geographer, and mathematician who lived from 78-139).
5. Probably Farsi
6. Formerly known as 'Gauln'. ADV uses 'Gauron', so we will too.
7. 'Kalium' is actually the element potassium, but since the Japanese got these loan words from German, it's pronounced Kalium.
8. Even though the sex of Wraith is unknown, I am using 'he' here for continuity and simplicity's sake.

The Afterword Eh...

As usual, I'm sorry for the incredibly long wait. I present to you the last part of 'Ending Day by Day'. For those who would rebuke, "But I've already forgotten what happened in the first one," I'm sorry.

This time this story was completely different.

Well, there were times when I thought, "The ending has to be a hijacking or a seajacking, and look like the ending of the 'Die Hard' series or 'Chinmoku' series." But this time the climax was more of a traditional super robot anime style. Strong, strong, extremely strong. And the hero gets to decide what to bash for a change.

At first, I was thinking of a plot that "allows" Sousuke to return back to his former life by reasons of pre-established harmony and windfall. However, that kind of situation- it being the organization's intentions that he continue his excessive lifestyle, no matter what kind of elaborate story I devised, it only felt unnatural to me. When I was stuck, a more plausible means of resolution from the beginning was the only thing I could think of.

This choice seemed obvious, and then I was hit with an unexpected blind spot. Grasping the rights and wrongs of a situation, for oneself rather than one's environment- a lot of people, myself included, tend to forget this kind of thing from time to time. You remember, but the severity of your environment makes you soon forget it. Those who are sincere are made out to be cynical, aren't they?

The writing of "Ending Day by Day" was a work to correct the malaise that Sousuke Sagara had been feeling against the Arbalest character. It was a short, steep mountain, but thanks to the hardships, it feels like he finally becomes the protagonist of

the story with real meaning. And the Arbalest also finally- truly finally, becomes the main mecha of the story. Like Sousuke, I also didn't feel much attachment for the Arbalest, but now I think "It's not a piece of garbage" without any maliciousness. It may not compare to the various leading robots that my predecessors have created, but don't you think that it's got some appeal?

It's for that reason that I think these novels are first a story about Sousuke and the Arbalest- and also a story about Sousuke himself. If you had asked Sousuke "Why are you at this school?", up till now he would have replied "It's my mission," but now he would reply "Because I choose to be." And on top of that, he should confront the situations and difficult themes that befall him.

Speaking of which, I want to say something. A hero who can't stand up for himself without his girlfriend scolding him- dear me, it's a pitiful thing. But I think that's how it is when you're young. This can't turn completely into Golgo 13^{*1}. Since he naturally won't stand up to Kaname. "Women are strong and beautiful," I've thought often for a long time. Now I watch the brave women who let me work with them. Wow.

This is still page three, right? While I was writing the story, I thought "I'll write about this and that in the after word," but when I finished writing it, I became more like "whatever's fine," for this. Even a report on how I've been getting along would work, too. There's not much to tell, since everyday is pretty ordinary. I'd have no choice but to write about the current news. I could talk about the Valkyrie plastic models coming from Hasegawa, but if I did that I'd take up another twenty pages going on about it.

Which reminds me, I actually went to collect data in Hong Kong. By myself. Lazily. This time it was supposed to be more of the main stage, but for plot and tempo convenience, I cut the descriptions and episode extremely short. It's disappointing. Well,

there are always a lot of scenes that get rejected, but if I get the chance, I want to try to return to Hong Kong again.

From here I will borrow some space for a few private messages.

Tomohiro Nagai, I received the tankoubons^{*2}- thank you very much. I'm sorry for not replying. Every month you allow me to burst out loud with laughter while I'm reading.

Retsu Tateo, thank you for the chocolate. Since it's a mutual neighborhood, how about we do dinner next time? I'm looking forward to new developments.

Ichirou Sakaki, thank you for the New Year's card. I'm sorry for not replying.

Toshihiko Tsukiji, I've neglected to stay in contact. How are your eyes? Let's have a good drink next time.

Giguru Akiguchi, please tell me the next time you're in Tokyo.

And Douji Shiki, congratulations. I'm sorry for being busy with my new life. Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you.

This novel was a lot of work for various people. Mr. Shiki, the editor Mr. S, as well everyone involved, thank you again as always for everything.

Well, then. Because this novel was rather heavy and full of frustration, I think I want to make the next one brighter and cheerier. For those who are worried that the mood of Full Metal Panic series will keep on being dark like it was in this novel, please don't worry.

Till next time, then. We'll accompany Sousuke into hell once again.

Shouji Gatou (Kung-fu Fighters Big Affirmative School)
March, 2001

Translator's notes:

1. Golgo 13 is another manga strip.
2. Tankoubons are Japanese comic books.

賀東招二
SHOUJI GATOU

フルメタル・パンク
FULLMETAL PANIC!
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Translator's Afterword:

Well, now I get to actually write something of my own. This was probably one of the most ambitious projects I ever decided to take on, and I was actually skeptical as to whether or not I would ever finish it, especially when I think of how hard it was when I started out. I know I didn't get everything perfect, but I can say that I did give everything my best effort. I really have appreciated all of the support I've gotten for the project, even though it's an unusual release for a manga scanlation group. I have to say, though, that it's been the most enjoyable thing that I've translated, not only because I love the series, but because there is more of me in this translation than you would normally see in a manga translation. Translating this has been as much about writing as it has been about translating, so I feel like I'm doing something that I used to love to do a long time ago. I remember earlier this year when I talked to my dad, who was a writer, and I told him what I was doing, he said, "You've got a little something of me in you, then." I don't think I will ever forget those words, because that was the last thing he ever told me. I know it sounds sappy, but I like that I'm getting to do something I enjoy while being able to provide something that others will enjoy.

Now I'm going to take some time out to plug a few people I want to thank. I want to thank Mukan and Jekias, because they are the ones that have really helped me out with this project. I'd like to thank all the Boku-tachi staff for letting me do this... even though it wasn't manga and it was something that I wanted to do. Another person I have to thank is my boyfriend, who is willing to leave me alone when I'm working on this stuff, has been supportive of everything I do, and has been there whenever I needed

him. I also want to thank everyone who reads this, because it gives me the motivation to keep working even when it's past midnight and I'm absolutely brain-dead. I also have to thank the creator's of Winamp, which is my best friend while I'm working ^^

Well, that's the end of this novel. But fear not, I will be continuing the story with the next novel "A Dancing Very Merry Christmas", as well as some random short stories when the mood strikes me. Well, until next time then, when I follow Sousuke into hell first, then try to drag everyone else along with me :)

Brandi
May 2004

Boku-tachi

<http://www.boku-tachi.net>

Translated by **Brandi**

Edited by **Mukanshin** and **Moonfaerie24**